

CRUCIAL COMMUNICATION: ASSESSING BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE  
COMMUNICATION EXPERIENCED BY COMMUNITY RESOURCE ORGANIZATIONS  
(CROs) DURING THE DEEPWATER HORIZON (DWH) OIL SPILL. A CASE STUDY.

By

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To my husband Wade and my three sons, Cooper, Greyson, and Thad  
Thank you for your patience, support, and love. I love you.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COD	Community outreach and dissemination core
CRO	Community resource organization
DWH	Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill
EOC	Emergency operations center
SCCT	Situational crisis communication theory

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Community resource organizations serve several purposes in the communities they serve. They serve the community in many different capacities including financial assistance, job training, and medical assistance. and they often provide services with limited resources including staff and funds. In times of crisis and disaster, such as the DWH Oil Spill, CROs are often the first call for many community members. Trust and experience with these organizations often puts them on the front line in times of disaster.

Community resource organizations in the Florida Panhandle worked to meet the environmental, economic, and social needs of the communities they serve caused by the impacts of the DWH Oil Spill. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine how CROs in the Florida Panhandle identified barriers to communication during the DWH oil spill. More specifically, the study examined the tactics used to overcome these barriers, to effectively communicate with target audiences.

The research used the case study strategy with documents from meetings, internal and external documents from the organizations, and nine in-depth interviews with

community leaders. Analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method to determine major and sub categories.

Results showed the following barriers to communication for CROs during the DWH oil spill: news media, lack of accurate information, ineffective communication efforts, lack of control over information, and the uniqueness of the situation. Data revealed that organizations recognized these barriers and worked with limited resources to overcome barriers by utilizing efforts centered on collaboration, crisis/issues management, and public relations. These efforts led to effective communication with their publics.

This study serves as a next step to moving beyond studying crisis and issues management from a singular perspective. The role of CROs in communicating about a crisis is still new to crisis communication literature. Future research should continue to look at the role of CROs during a crisis and as an extension of communicating to publics. In addition, research should continue to assess the role of CROs in crisis communication best practices and models.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The DWH oil spill lends itself to research in several different areas including environmental impact, oil spills, communication, new media, ecosystems, Gulf of Mexico, toxicity, community impacts, economic impacts, and psychological impacts. Because of the vast impact of the DWH oil spill, funding agencies such as NOAA and the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative have funded grants ranging from ecosystem impact to community resiliency. In 2011, a large southeastern university was awarded a lead in a grant as part of the “Deepwater Horizon Research Consortia” funded by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences. The purpose of the Consortium was to “conduct community based and laboratory research in the affected region over a five-year period” (Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Position Statement, 2012, para. 3). The grant “Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities (HGHC): Health Impact of Deepwater Horizon Spill in Eastern Gulf Coast Communities,” includes researchers from five large universities and focuses on eastern Gulf Coast communities.

The project includes three distinct research areas, including individual and family resiliency, community resiliency, and seafood safety. In addition to these research areas, the grant includes a Community Outreach and Dissemination Core (COD) that aims to develop a dialog with communities to learn from their past experiences, learn how best to communicate with them and provide education and tools that may assist with future disasters.

The role of the COD core is to work with community leaders and CROs and to partner with them to effectively disseminate research results to communities and develop work plans based on results. Work within these communities and with

partnering organizations has quickly uncovered the vital role CROs played before, during, and after the DWH oil spill. The CROs' presence in these communities was vital in providing services for recovery efforts. In addition, the CROs were sought out by community members to provide information to a community facing an unfamiliar crisis. Although not new to communicating with the communities in which they serve, CROs were suddenly tasked with providing information on a crisis that in which they were not directly involved.

Given the importance of the role of communication during a crisis and the vital role CROs played before, during, and after the DWH oil spill, the purpose of this research was to build on theoretical knowledge of the role of effective communication and CROs in environmental disasters. To do this, this study went beyond traditional crisis/disaster studies and focus on organizations not directly, but indirectly involved with the crisis, because of the services they provided to the affected communities. Specifically, this study aimed to understand barriers to effective communication encountered by CROs during the DWH oil spill and the tactics used to overcome these barriers. By examining research questions using a single-case-study approach, emergent themes could be compared from various data including in-depth interviews, documents, meeting notes, and transcripts. Themes from combined data were recorded and analyzed to determine the major themes of the case study. These themes were used to develop a model for CROs to identify and overcome effective communication barriers during environmental disasters.

### **Communication within Organizations**

Communication with both internal and external publics is crucial to the life of any organization (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Communication is integral to all types of

organizations and is considered part of strategic management. “Management relies on communication professionals to maintain good relationships with the organization’s external publics” (Grunig, 1992b, p. 72). Maintaining communication with target publics helps to both develop and strengthen relationships. “Support of stakeholders and publics is crucial to an organization’s existence” (Fearn-Banks, 2001).

As the role of communication is important within all organizations, it is an essential element for nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations rely on communication tactics to carry out the mission of the organization, fundraise, and recruit volunteers. “Strategic communications is a way for nonprofits to approach public outreach and media relations not as stand-alone activities but rather as an integration of critical organizational functions” (Bonk, 2010, p. 329). Integrated communication tactics in the daily work of nonprofit organizations is crucial to their survival.

### **Communicating during a Crisis**

During a crisis situation, the role of communications takes an accelerated position. “In general, the public wants access to as much information as possible” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 28). However, because of the psychological impacts of disasters, “people may receive, interpret, and act on information differently during an emergency than during a normal period” (p. 28). Reasoning may change and public may react differently to communication messages. In addition, recent communication technology developments make it necessary for organizations to keep in constant contact with their publics during a crisis situation. This has become the norm as publics have come to expect constant contact from all organizations. Failure of organizations to keep in contact could result in publics perceiving organizations as untrustworthy (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). Crisis communication researchers say a crisis communication plan should include a

system for communicating with target publics (Coombs, 2012). Fearn-Banks (2001) adds that the “process of crisis communication is the verbal, visual and written interaction between the organization and its publics” (p. 480). It is agreed that communication is an essential part of any crisis situation. In fact, the first two eight Crisis Management Guidelines outlined by Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2001) start with the word “communicate”. “Communicate accurately and openly about the crisis, and maintain openness with stakeholders. Communicate quickly to maintain a proactive response to the crisis” (p. 163).

Among crisis situations, Kapucu (2006) discussed that “the effective flow of information across organizations boundaries is critical for an organization’s ability to remain effective in this dynamic disaster environment” (p. 216). More specifically, environmental crises are unique in their impact on the public sphere (Cox, 2010). Impacts of such crises can be felt both directly and indirectly; therefore, the importance of communication during an environmental crisis situation is crucial. Communication with publics during an environmental crisis can also be complex. In addition to communicating about a particular crisis, tactics also may need to be developed to explain the science behind the incident. In addition, as an environmental crisis can affect a large portion of the general public, messages may need to be communicated differently in order to reach different publics.

A report in *TIME* Magazine, Cruz (2010), identified the top five environmental disasters before the DWH oil spill: Chernobyl, Bhopal, Kuwaiti Oil Fires, Love Canal, and the *Exxon Valdez*. Each of these disasters heightened public awareness of the

potential dangers of radiation, chemicals and nature (Cox, 2010; Heath & Palenchar, 2009).

The British Petroleum DWH oil spill surpassed the Exxon *Valdez* in gallons of oil released into the ocean. However, the impact of the Exxon *Valdez* accident on Alaska's Prince William Sound was devastating. "The pollution killed thousands of seabirds, sea otters, and other wildlife and seriously harmed local fisheries" (Cox, 2010, p. 344). "Numerous fishermen, especially Native Americans, lost their livelihoods" (Pauly & Hutchinson, 2005, p. 235). The Exxon *Valdez* disaster, and Exxon's reaction, were the object of research surrounding image restoration and lack of public relations in response. "The CEO, Lawrence Rawl, did not become an active part of the public relations effort and actually shunned public involvement" (Pauly & Hutchinson, 2005, p. 236). In addition, Exxon was criticized for establishing a media center in Valdez, which was not equipped to handle the heightened news media attention. "This environmental disaster would go down in crisis management history as a textbook case of how not to handle or communicate during a crisis" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 276).

Discussions of the lack of public relations in response to the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill indicate Exxon's lack of interest in communicating with the news media and continued shifting of responsibility (Pauly & Hutchinson, 2005). In Sylves and Comfort's (2012) research comparing the Exxon *Valdez* and the DWH oil spill, they remarked that although Exxon consulted the environmental community after the spill, the role of government in the cleanup was "supervisory and fragmented" (p. 86).

### **Effective Communication**

Effective communication is defined as communication that was interpreted by the receiver the way the sender intended (Fielding, 2006). However, communication is a

complex process and meanings are not simply handed down to others. Instead, people must work together to ensure the same meaning for all (p.11). This is especially true during a crisis, when organizations must provide effective communication immediately. To begin, developing a strong communication relationship with stakeholders is essential for effective communication. Ulmer, et al. (2011) argue that developing a strong communication relationship with stakeholders involves communicating with them often, openly and honestly following a crisis. In addition, they stress that effective communication during a crisis includes designating regular intervals during response and recovery to listen to stakeholders and address questions and concerns (p. 49). Ulmer, et al. (2011) discuss that crisis events can often lead to opportunities for organizations, and argue that following a crisis “effective communication skills are essential to creating positive, renewing opportunities” (p. 4).

### **Barriers to Effective Communication**

Effective communication involves overcoming barriers to communication in order to convey a clear and concise message (Barriers to Effective Communication, 2012, para. 2). During times of crisis, effective communication can become increasingly difficult because of various barriers (Ulmer, et al., 2011). Crisis situations require those assisting with recovery efforts to communicate effectively with those affected (Pressman & Schneider, 2009). Because this initial communication is so important, a lack of communication, and/or barriers to communication, can lead to an increase in fear, anxiety and frustrations by those affected by the crisis (Pressman & Schneider, 2009). “They [barriers] result in a distortion of the message and the goal is never accomplished” (Reynolds, 2012, para. 20).

Barriers to effective communication often result in a lack of understanding of the message or elicit a wrong or negative response from the receiver, therefore making communication ineffective. Hence, overcoming these barriers to communication is essential in developing effective, crucial, communication during a crisis. Barriers are defined as any obstacle (internal or external) that hinders effective communication. Barriers are often defined in categories (including noise, language, culture, environmental, trust, individual, organizational, attitudinal, or channel) (Jain, 2008).

Communication during a crisis also requires a delicate balancing act. During a crisis, there is an increased demand for information from publics; however, the information needs to be managed in order to not increase anxiety (Reynolds, 2012). Understanding and overcoming barriers to communication during a crisis can help achieve this balance of information.

### **DWH Oil Spill**

Adding to the list of the top ten environmental disasters was the DWH oil spill. On 20 April 2010, the DWH oil platform exploded off the coast of Louisiana, eventually spilling 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The oil reached more than 950 miles of Gulf Coast shoreline in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The explosion killed 11 workers and injured 17 others. This event has been called the worst environmental disaster to date, and has surpassed the amount of oil spilled in U.S. waters by the Exxon *Valdez* in 1989.

Two days after the explosion, the platform sank to the bottom of the ocean, leaving a leaking well that poured oil into the Gulf of Mexico for 87 days. From the moment of the explosion, more than 47,000 responders (including the Coast Guard, BP officials, and government agencies) went into reaction mode in an effort to stop the oil

(Austin & Laferrier, 2011). Meanwhile, surrounding Gulf communities watched nervously in hopes the oil would not affect individual communities and economies.

In the aftermath of the oil spill, more than 20,000 individuals were involved in the cleanup (Levy & Gopalakrishnan, 2010). Different techniques were used to remove the oil. Inclement weather further hindered cleanup efforts. However, the complexity of the issue reached beyond what was happening in the water alone. Many Gulf state communities were affected before oil showed up on the coastlines. The DWH oil spill released over 4 million “barrels of crude oil over 87 days in the Gulf, whose \$3 billion fishing industry provides one third of all seafood consumed in the United States” (Johnson, Clakins, & Fisk, 2012, para. 4). Fishing and harvesting from the sea were restricted, even in areas that did not have oil on shore.

Communities impacted by the DWH oil spill were strongly tied to the Gulf for their livelihood. Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus developed a report “America’s Gulf Coast: A Long Term Recovery Plan after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill” (2010). In that plan, he discussed the importance of the Gulf to the nation. “One third of the seafood harvested in the continental United States, as well as 30% of oil production and 13% of our natural gas productions comes from the Gulf” (Mabus Report, 2010, intro.). He also discussed the importance of the Gulf to the affected communities.

In the wake of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, what has become clear is that the economy of the Gulf Coast and the health of its citizens are inextricably linked to the health of the Gulf’s waters and shoreline. A significant portion of the jobs in the region are connected to companies and small businesses involved in tourism; commercial and recreational fishing; and related services. Because of the spill, these industries have lost income as confidence in the safety of the Gulf’s beaches and seafood has fallen. (p. 1)

## Why Study the DWH Oil Spill?

On 15 June 2010, President Obama declared the DWH oil spill as the worst environmental disaster in America (“Remarks by the President”, 2010). As with the Exxon *Valdez* disaster, this was also defined as a man-made or human generated disaster. A man-made disaster often refers to disasters stemmed from technological problems and differs from natural disasters in that “the principal direct causes are identifiable human actions, deliberate or otherwise” (Noji, 1997, p.7). Human generated disasters often “occur in human settlements and involve situations in which the civilian population suffers casualties and loss of property, basic services and a means of livelihood” (p. 8).

In discussion focused on man-made disasters and particularly the DWH oil spill and Exxon *Valdez*, the costs of livelihood or resources lost (social costs) become an integral point between natural and man-made disasters. In his report titled *A Taxonomy of Oil Spill Costs*, Mark Cohen (2010) discussed that the total estimated social costs only of the DWH oil spill ranges from \$60 billion to over \$100 billion (p.3). Exxon *Valdez*, paid over \$6 billion in social costs. However, Cohen noted in his report that although the “Exxon *Valdez* spill was extremely costly to Exxon, it did not bear the full cost of social damages” (p. 4).

In addition to costs, the long-term effects of man-made disasters can be detrimental to an impacted community. Goldsteen and Schorr’s (1982) study on the effects of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Reactor disaster on a small community found that man-made disasters may have more long-term effects than natural disasters because of community distress, distrust and perception. Picou, Marshall, and Gill (2004) continued this research by noting that communities tend to come together for natural

disasters and collaborate efforts, but tend to focus on litigation and a responsible party after man-made disasters. Going deeper into communities, Norris, Byrne, Diaz, and Kaniasty (2001) also found a difference in the effects of disaster types on individuals and concluded that man-made disasters were often more psychologically stressful than natural disasters for individuals.

### **Communication and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill**

The DWH oil spill lends itself to study by communications researchers for several reasons including the availability of information via traditional and new media channels, and the large impact the disaster had on communities in five states (the environmental impact, the large economic impact and psychological distress, and personal coping impacts). The news media coverage included both traditional and new media channels to disseminate information. “Social media and its various manifestations, including social networks, blogs, mobile text messages, and RSS feeds have emerged from a novelty five years ago to an important and sophisticated set of contemporary communications tools” (Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011, p. 227). The advent of social media, not a factor in earlier major environmental disasters, made the controlling of information from this disaster very difficult. This advent of new media and technology makes this disaster different from the Exxon *Valdez* spill 20 years earlier. Captain Meredith L. Austin and Captain Roger R. Laferrier of the United States Coast Guard co-authored a paper presented at the 2011 International Oil Spill Conference. One of their major communication challenges during the DWH oil spill was “that it’s not just TV: There has been an explosion of on-line magazines, blogs and news websites. It is impossible to monitor all of them. Therefore, if something inaccurate is posted, it may never be corrected because of lack of visibility by [the source]” (p. 3).

**News media coverage.** In addition, the news media continued to provide up-to-the-minute coverage of the disaster. The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010) conducted a study focused on the news media coverage of the DWH oil spill. Their research evaluated over 2,800 stories about the oil spill that ran between 20 April 2010 (the day that the DWH oil rig exploded) until 28 July 2010 (the day after then British Petroleum CEO Tony Hayward's resignation was announced). The study noted, "unlike most catastrophes, which tend to break quickly and subside almost as fast, the spill was a slow-motion disaster that demanded constant vigilance and sustained reporting" ("One Hundred Days of Gushing Oil," 2010, para. 2). Eight key points from their research demonstrates the heightened news media awareness of this story. Three points regarding coverage of the DWH oil spill included that the story "accounted for 22% of the newshole – almost double the next biggest story. In the 14 full weeks included in this study, the disaster finished among the top three weekly stories 14 times. And it registered as the number one story in nine of those weeks" ("One Hundred Days of Gushing Oil," 2010, para. 11). Interestingly, the story was covered mainly on cable news "(31% of airtime), with CNN devoting more time (42%) than MSNBC or Fox News. The oil spill accounted for 29% of the coverage on network news as the three big commercial broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS) spent virtually the same amount of time on the story" (para. 15). Their research showed that actual news of the spill was not prominent on popular social media sites, but personal reactions and comments were prominent. The significant news media coverage was in response to the public interest. Surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the

People and the Press found that between 50 and 60% of Americans “were following the story very closely during the studied time period” (para.18).

Interactive coverage was also prominent in news media coverage. News media provided real-time video of the oil leak along the ocean floor, (Figure 1-1), which was one of the most popular links on CBSNews.com (Guthrie, 2010, p. 20). Providing this image stream around the clock contributed to public interest in the story, which continued to fuel news media coverage.

*Broadcasting & Cable* (June, 2010) reported that Rick Kaplan, executive producer of the CBS Evening News with Katie Couric, stated, “this [DWH] is one of those seminal moments when a network news division proves its worth” (p. 20). Although there was criticism from President Obama regarding the news media’s eventual tiring of the DWH oil spill coverage, many reporters and producers thought their coverage was more of a true responsibility (Guthrie, 2010, p. 20). Producers argued that the eventual fatigue of covering the oil spill was very unlikely to happen as the situation continued to evolve. In the article, Kaplan’s quote perhaps sums up news media’s impression best.

This is a real catastrophe. People’s way of life has been destroyed. And it has the potential to be permanent. We can’t let our fellow countrymen down. We have to try to hold BP’s feet to the fire and hold the president accountable. Enough with the great rhetoric. We need to shut the hole and clean the oil out of the water. (p. 20)

Comments such as this from a major news station executive producer demonstrate the emotional impact that this disaster had on those that were indirectly impacted.

### **Economic and Environmental Impacts**

Economically, the Gulf of Mexico fishing and recreational industries were greatly damaged, some perhaps beyond repair. “While wide-scale government efforts were in place to reduce the risk of seafood tainted with oil from getting to market, Gulf Coast

seafood processors were adversely affected by the spill; they reportedly cancelled orders and restaurants then informed patrons that they do not use Gulf seafood” (Sylves & Comfort, 2012, p. 85). The tourism industry was affected by tourists canceling their plans to the Gulf and making plans for vacations in other areas. News media coverage of tar balls on the beaches and a scarred coastline greatly impacted a once thriving tourism industry (Mabus Report, 2010).

Environmentally, wildlife, surrounding wetlands and bird populations were all affected by the DWH oil spill. Wildlife deaths were relatively small (Sylves & Comfort, 2012). However, birds were particularly at risk, as the spill coincided with their breeding and migration patterns. Oil on their feathers could have caused “some birds to die on their route north because they lack the energy to withstand the additional burden” (p. 86).

### **Psychological Impacts**

The economic and environmental impacts of the DWH oil spill were assumed and expected; however, the psychological impacts on the people of the Gulf Coast communities were perhaps not quite as anticipated. Grattan, Roberts, Mahan, McLaughlin, Otwell, and Morris, 2011 studied the early psychological impacts of the DWH oil spill on residents in fishing communities in Florida and Alabama. Their 2011 study found “that people living in a Gulf Coast community with indirect impact had elevated levels of anxiety and depression similar to those of people living in communities where oil reached their shores” (p. 842). Not surprisingly, those who “suffered income losses as a result of the spill reported significantly more tension/anxiety, depression, anger, fatigue, confusion, and overall mood disturbance than their income-stable counterparts” (p. 842).

## **Complexity of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill**

From the initial explosion, this DWH disaster had multiple facets. Austin and Laferriere (2011) were able to provide a “unique perspective from the Incident Commander view on the critical importance of stakeholder outreach and risk communications to keep government officials, local public and responders informed of oil spill impacts and response activities” (p.1). Captains Austin and Laferrier both serve in the Coast Guard and served as Incident Commanders during the DWH oil spill. The article stands out from other articles that focused more specifically on communication from BP headquarters. Austin and Laferrier’s (2011) article provided inside information into how government officials managed a vast amount of information for a vast number of stakeholders. Their article discussed communication with several different stakeholders, including federal, state, and local government, internal communication, communication with BP officials and communication with the general public. They discussed challenges, including meeting the demands for communication, understanding sources of information, frustrations over having information presented as reported, and controlling all the sources of information that are currently available. In their article, they also discussed risk perception and communication, as well as many of the controversial issues surrounding the DWH oil spill and ended their article with recommendations for communication effectiveness in such large-scale disasters. Interestingly, at the beginning of the article, they stated that communication was challenging for several reasons, including the magnitude of the incident, the complexity and duration of the incident and other factors including recession, political strife, and upcoming elections (p.2).

One example of the complexity of the disaster is the issue of oil on the Florida coastline. Several Florida Gulf communities were directly impacted by oil on their shores. However, many communities were not directly impacted (i.e. - no actual oil on the coast), but suffered indirectly including economic impacts. Mabus (2010) discussed the impact on these communities that already struggled because of previous natural disasters.

The spill has exacerbated the effects of a multitude of storms and years of environmental decline. Building on these earlier problems, the oil spill created economic uncertainty for hundreds of thousands of Americans, and its social consequences and behavioral health effects have stretched the capacity of nonprofit organizations and local governments. Moreover, local, state, and tribal governments face the prospect of diminished resources to deal with these issues because of lower tax revenues from lost economic activity and diminished property values. (p.1)

On 4 June 2010, oil reached the Florida coast in Pensacola, a beach community in the western tip of the Florida Panhandle. The area was already crippled from a collapsing real estate market and increasing unemployment rates. A decline in both tourism and the commercial seafood industry from the spill added to already mounting problems in Gulf communities. "Florida, already weak from the real estate crash, is more vulnerable to the oil's effects than other gulf states because of its lack of a state income tax and strong reliance on the multibillion tourism industry" (Miller, 2010, para. 7). In addition, Florida, with the largest coastline of the five states bordering the Gulf, was the most susceptible to severe ecosystem damage caused by the oil.

In addressing the duration of the incident, the well was finally capped on 15 July 15 2010, but cleanup continued. The phrase "long term" is found in many articles and publications referring to the continuing effects that will be felt by the Gulf communities. These include economic decline, ecological damage, and perhaps impacts that remain

unknown. Long term is also used in discussions regarding the cleanup, which continues in all Gulf communities. Although volunteers no longer comb the beaches for tar balls and bits of oil, many organizations are taking part in a different cleanup effort. More than two years later, effects felt by the communities remain evident. These effects include psychological, sociological, and economic impacts on the individual communities. Current news stories focus on BP payouts and litigation over the spill. British Petroleum has paid close to \$15 billion to Gulf coast residents and businesses (Fowler, 2012, p. A3). Billboards and advertisements in local papers continue to encourage residents to act on receiving rightful compensation for the stresses they suffered because of the oil spill.

In addition to monetary boosts, various research grants are currently being conducted in communities impacted by the oil spill. Much of the research is focused on the environment and the effects of the oil and dispersants on the Gulf and surrounding coastline. The BP-Sponsored Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative (GOMRI) approved funding for 19 grants to study the effects of the DWH oil spill on the Gulf of Mexico (“BP-Sponsored Gulf of Mexico Research”, 2012, p.1). An estimated \$20 million will go to the research projects over the next three years.

In addition to environmental impacts, other research is focused on individuals and communities impacted. For instance, the GuLF Study sponsored by the National Institute of Health and the National Institute of Environmental Health looks at the health and psychological impact of workers and volunteers involved with the oil spill. A call for volunteers to participate in these studies runs through 31 December 2012. Health

research focus spans from the economic and environmental consequences to the resilience of these communities to handle future disasters.

### **Community Resource Organizations**

Community resource organizations are often defined for the services they provide for local communities. Berkowits and Wadud (2012) discuss that these organizations will work to fill a need and/or gap within a community. They state that all communities have needs and gaps that need to be filled. Given their definition, the role of these organizations within communities is crucial as these organizations provide services that “improve the quality of community life” (Identifying community assets and resource, para. 4). Miller (2009) also spoke to the reliability of these organizations within a community. He stated, “The consistent, reliable productivity of meaningful results indeed, almost certainly, will confer the status of ‘community resource’ upon the organization” (p. 74). In addition to organizations, Berkowits and Wadud (2012) state that a community resource can be defined as a person, physical structure, community service or business. However, for the purpose of this study, special attention will be paid to organizations that provide a much-needed service to an impacted community.

The term CRO is very common in medical literature when referring to organizations that provide services for patients outside of medical facilities. In January 1999, the HMO Workgroup on Care Management developed a report titled *Establishing Relations with Community Resource Organizations: An imperative for Managed Care Organizations Serving Medicare Beneficiaries*. In their report, they defined community resource organizations as “community-based social services agencies” (HMO Workgroup on Care Management, 1999, p. 4). The term social service is often used when discussing CROs as medical literature, such as this report, point to these

organizations to meet the social needs of their patients. The report emphasized the need of the medical community to become aware, and collaborate with, CROs to provide patients with the utmost care by addressing both medical and social needs (HMO Workgroup on Care Management, 1999). In support of their recommendation, the work of HMO workgroup was referenced in one study of Alzheimer's patients that resulted in a reduction in doctor visits, decreased depression in patients and satisfaction with health plans when patients were working with a CRO (Alzheimer's Association chapter) in collaboration with their healthcare provider (Clark, Bass, Looman, McCarthy, & Eckert, 2004). Collaboration with a local association chapter is one example of a CRO referenced in the workgroup's report. The workgroup gave other examples including county/city, social service organizations, United Way, religious organizations, associations and local chapters of larger organizations, YMCA/YWCA, Cooperative Extension Service and community centers.

**Community resource organizations during a crisis.** The HMO Workgroup report showed the value of community resource organizations during a personal difficult time and/or crisis. Given their value during a personal crisis, their value during a community crisis is equally as valuable in offering much-needed social and economic services. These CROs are instrumental in helping communities in times of crisis and are often called upon by community members for assistance. Miller (2009) discussed CROs as "organizations that people can count on, whether in hard times, dealing with tough issues or acting in various ominous circumstances". (p. 74). He references CROs as "pillar of strengths" that people expect to stay strong and be there for them in times of turmoil.

An organization viewed as a community resource is one that sees beyond the nearest wall, boundary, or border. It encompasses a long-run vision, an appreciation for individuals and entities connected to its enterprise, and steps forward from the ranks to accept a particularly troubling assignment. (p. 74).

### **Organizations Involved in the DWH Oil Spill**

Austin and Laferriere (2011) discussed that one of the communication challenges during the initial response to the DWH oil spill was the many different information sources. This included “47,000 responders working for various companies, agencies and levels of government” (p. 3). After the initial response and cleanup continued, the role of nonprofits became more evident, as nonprofits stepped up to assist their communities to recover from the impacts of the disaster.

Handy, Seto, Wakaruk, Mersey, Mejia, and Copeland (2010) found in their research that “nonprofits are perceived as being more trustworthy than for profits or government organizations” (p. 878). Understanding that trust of nonprofit organizations is higher, it is fair to assume that during an environmental crisis, community members may be more apt to go to local, trusted nonprofit sources for their information.

In addition to a higher level of trust, several studies (Kapucu, 2006; Simo & Bies, 2007) have discussed the importance of partnership and collaboration among nonprofit organizations, for-profit organizations, and governmental agencies during a crisis. Kapucu (2006) discussed that “effective response and recovery operations require partnership and trust between government agencies at all levels and between the public and nonprofit sector agencies” (p. 217). The article went on to discuss that responding to a crisis involves all stakeholders in a community and cannot be left to governmental agencies alone (Kapucu, 2006). Therefore, the role of nonprofits in a crisis situation is crucial in all aspects including first response, dissemination of information, and cleanup.

Many organizations were heavily involved in the different aspects of the DWH oil spill. Within the Florida Panhandle, community organizations were working to address immediate problems, but also working to lessen future financial burdens of community members. Examples of community organizations included Florida Extension offices, state governmental agencies, faith-based nonprofit organizations, local affiliates of nationwide nonprofit organizations, umbrella disaster preparedness/response organizations, and local environmental groups.

### **Florida Extension**

The Florida Extension Service is defined as “a federal, state, and county partnership dedicated to developing knowledge in agriculture, human and natural resources, and the life sciences and to making that knowledge accessible to sustain and enhance the quality of human life” (“About extension” para. 4). They offer programs such as agriculture, marine sciences, family and consumer services, horticulture, natural resources, and water quality.

The role of Extension in a community affected by a disaster is historically one of assisting the community during large - and small-scale crisis situations (Cartwright, Case, Gallagher, & Hathaway, 2002). Telg, Irani, Muegge, Kistler, and Place (2007) found in their research of the role of extension in response to natural disasters that Extension personnel are often the first to arrive and provide vital aid, assistance, and information. Extension members played a vital role in the DWH oil spill as they served as members of the Emergency Operations Centers (EOC), answered questions from community regarding the DWH oil spill and its impacts, and communicated with their stakeholders through established communication channels including newsletters, social media, and news media.

## **Additional Organizations**

State governmental agencies (such as Department of Health, Department of Children and Families, Department of Elder Affairs, Department of Financial Affairs, and Department of Education) often serve four to five counties in any particular area. Their mission is centered on serving the public by providing programs that address an unmet need in that area. During the DWH oil spill, several state agencies were represented on the EOC and served their communities through financial assistance.

Faith-based organizations often provide services across several county lines. Although faith-based, these organization work to serve the community regardless of race, religion or nationality. During the DWH oil spill, these organizations served as members of the EOC and impacted their communities through already established programs.

Affiliate offices of larger, nationwide nonprofit organizations often serve one to three counties in an area. They work to strengthen the communities that they serve through the mission of the larger organization. Often these organizations tailor programs and services to best meet the needs in their communities.

Umbrella disaster preparedness and recovery organizations are a collaboration of organizations working together to improve the lives of those within their communities. One way they do this is to help their community prepare for and recover from disasters. These organizations evolved following the hurricanes Ivan and Dennis in 2004 and 2005 as a means to assist with the long-term recovery of the residents within their county.

Local environmental groups work on a local level to protect the environment. They do this by working to influence policy, holding fundraising events, providing information

to the community, and working to better the environment. During the DWH oil spill, members of these organizations volunteered to help clean the beaches and provide information.

Each of the organizations had a role during and after the DWH oil spill. Senior members of each of the organizations were (and continue to be) involved in recovery efforts surrounding the spill. These organizations serve as resources to their communities to assist in all different levels (including economic, social, environmental, and psychological).

### **The Case Study Approach**

A single case study was chosen as a research method in order to provide a more in-depth description of the role CROs had in disseminating information during the DWH oil spill. The method was chosen in order to contribute to knowledge of the impact the DWH oil spill had on communication efforts of community resource organizations within coastal communities. Yin (2009) discussed “case study allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 4). In addition, he states that case study may be an appropriate method when focusing on decisions and processes made by individuals, organizations, and programs when behavior cannot be controlled and when the investigator has access to participants in a contemporary event.

The case study method, defined as studying behaviors rather than controlling, is a common theme among qualitative literature. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) described case studies as the researchers’ “attempt to describe the subject’s entire range of behaviors and the relationship of these behaviors to the subject’s history

and environment” (p. 457). The authors continue to discuss the advantages of the case study as the depth it provides and how often it can “provide an opportunity for an investigator to develop insight into basic aspects of human behavior” (p. 457).

The DWH oil spill makes for an ideal case study because of the magnitude, complexity, and duration of the incident. The involvement of many different organizations at various levels provided an in-depth understanding of the crisis communication efforts during the DWH oil spill. This understanding will contribute to crisis communication theory by focusing on the minor players and their communication efforts in a crisis. “Theory developed from case study research is likely to have important strengths like novelty, testability, and empirical validity, which arise from the intimate linkage with empirical evidence” (Eisenhardt, 2010, p. 549).

Hansen (1993) stated “although the environment occasionally and spectacularly draws attention to itself in the form of major disaster and accidents, environmental problems by and large depend for their public visibility on complex processes of claims-making activity” (p. xv-forward). This dependence on public visibility makes this a study that can be carried over to other ongoing environmental issues and environmental crisis situations.

As Cox (2010) discussed, how environmental issues are perceived is largely influenced by what we see, hear, and how we talk about it. Stamm, Clark, and Eblacas (2000) also discussed in their study of mass communication and global warming that “communication, both mass and interpersonal, holds the key to improvement in public understanding of environmental problems” (p. 219). Therefore, it is important to

understand how communicating about these complex issues is critical in effectively communicating to key publics about environmental disasters.

### **Significance of the Study**

For many years, crisis communication has been studied simply from a single organizational, managerial perspective. However, recent crisis events such as Hurricane Katrina in 2005 have refocused some researchers to look more broadly. Adkins (2012) discussed in his book chapter regarding governmental networks during Hurricane Katrina that “a disaster or crisis event rarely if ever has an impact that is limited to only one organization or entity” (p. 95). He suggests that discrediting threats to the organizational networks can leave the single organization open to further problems. Adkins (2012) said “that unless we begin to examine disasters and crises from a more holistic perspective that encompasses entire networks or organizations, we will continue to overlook potentially important insights that cannot be explained by analysis of the individual organizations we have typically studied to date” (p. 113). He went on to explain by taking a more “holistic approach to studying crisis/disaster communication it encourages the incorporation of new theoretical framework” (p. 113).

Waymer and Heath (2007) agree and discuss in their essay that the managerial perspective often dominates crisis communication research and literature. They stated, “There is little or no attention to the voices of the affected publics, those whose interests are part or most of the reason why the subject organization is suffering a crisis and in need of responding to public and media inquiry” (p. 88). The authors argue that by broadening research to affected publics and stakeholders, it provides researchers with a better understanding of crisis situations. Although their essay focused specifically on the rhetoric of government officials, it can be argued that by involving community resource

organizations in the broadened research, the researcher can determine a deeper understanding of communication with affected publics.

Based upon the recommendations of crisis/disaster researchers, the results of this study will make a theoretical contribution crisis communication and its relationship to CROs and barriers to effective communication in environmental disasters. More specifically, this study aimed to understand the effective communication tactics utilized by CROs to overcome barriers and better communicate with their publics during the DWH oil spill environmental disaster.

### **Research Questions**

Given the significance and focus of the study, the following research questions were used as a guide to develop, analyze, and finally, draw conclusions from this case study. The questions for this study included

- **RQ1:** How would community resource organizations describe the barriers to effective communication that they encountered during and after the DWH oil spill?
- **RQ2:** How did community resource organizations overcome communication barriers in order to communicate with their audiences effectively?



Figure 1-1. Image of oil gushing from uncapped well

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, effective communication and barriers to effective communication are discussed. Specifically, these areas are addressed using a broad definition, but then evaluated more closely in relation to crisis theory and crisis communication.

Furthermore, excellence theory, systems theory, and collaboration theory are discussed in relationship to effective communication. Finally, issues management was further elaborated on in relation to crisis theory, excellence theory, and collaboration theory.

### **Effective Communication**

Figure 2-1 shows the basic Shannon-Weaver model of communication. This model identifies communication as a process involving a sender, receiver, message, channel, and feedback; effective communication can essentially be defined as when the transaction is successful. Fielding (2006) stressed the importance of people in the communication process. More specifically, “people have to work together according to a set of rules. People have to ensure that they share the same meanings when they use words” (p. 9). Given so many levels within the process, there is ample opportunity for problems. “Achieving effective communication is not always easy, but the results are worth it: increased effectiveness and efficiency, higher morale, an honest exchange of thoughts and opinions, and a more harmonious work environment” (McWilliams, 2005, p. 98).

Effectively communicating during a crisis becomes more complex. Ulmer, et al. (2011) defined ten lessons for effective communication during a crisis. Although these lessons are geared toward organizations at the center of the crisis, they can be applied to CROs that are responding the crisis with their stakeholders, as these organizations

provide services to the communities impacted by the crisis. Several lessons that apply include determine goals, develop partnerships, identify stakeholders, strengthen stakeholder relationships, listen to stakeholders, and provide useful, practical information. Forging partnerships as well as identifying and strengthening stakeholder relationships are all steps that can be done prior to a crisis situation and may take some time to develop. However, listening to stakeholders and providing useful and practical information can be done relatively quickly and is an integral part of developing a crisis communication plan. Ulmer, et al. (2011) defined goal development as “broad statements that help guide decision making for the organization” (p. 42). The authors also emphasized the importance of collaborating with other organizations and groups that are important to the organization. They stated, “We believe that they [organizations] should collaborate with other groups, work out potential goal conflicts, and establish partnerships” (p. 42). Benefits of collaborating will be examined more carefully in the discussion on collaboration theory. Identifying and strengthening stakeholder relationships is a key first step in message development.

Ulmer, et al. (2011) discussed that organizations need to begin this process before a crisis occurs. “When organizations need to communicate following a crisis, they are often communicating with groups they do not know very well. This lack of familiarity exists because the organization has not established any prior relationships and has no base for the communication” (p. 45-46). They cautioned that not having a prior relationship can lead to ineffective communication. Lesson 5 indicates that organizations should listen to their stakeholders and that organizations should consider public listening sessions to allow for “opportunities for stakeholder to interact with key

organizational representatives” (p. 49). Finally, Ulmer et al. state the importance of providing accurate and practical information for stakeholders. Many of the other lessons play into this particular lesson. Understanding stakeholders and the information they need, will assist an organization with providing those stakeholders with accurate and relevant information.

### **Barriers to Effective Communication**

Shrivastava (2012) defined barriers as any block in the communication process. “The transmission of information is a very challenging process, as it passes from one point to another through various obstructions known as barriers” (p. 7). Further, Fielding (2006) discussed some of the major barriers as not understanding the audience or the receiver, the message may not be tailored to the audience, more information is needed, channels are used ineffectively, communication strategy was not utilized, and not enough information.

Barriers can change based upon situation and/or environment, sender, receiver, message, and channel. Given this information, barriers exist at each step of the communication process. In the communication process model (Figure 2-1), barriers to communication can also be identified as the noise designated within the model. Noise can come in several different forms including “physical noise, psychological noise, semantic noise, and demographic noise” (Smith, 2009, p. 166).

However, in Shrivastava (2012) conceptual framework of communication barriers, noise and barriers were separated into two models. “The sent message, in a normal course, encounters interruptions either of barriers or noises” (p.11). Barriers can arise from the past experience or background of the sender or receiver and are defined as something that halts the process at any stage. Similarly, noise is defined as occurring

“during the decoding process of messages transmitted over a channel by an encoder” (p. 15). Noises are typically defined as unexpected and happen rather quickly in the process. In Shrivastava (2012) conceptual models, barriers are defined as physical, perceptual, emotional, cultural, technological, language, gender, interpersonal, and noise (p.11). Noise barriers are defined as environmental noise, physiological noise, psychological noise, cultural noise, organizational noise, syntactical noise, and semantic noise (p. 15).

Overall, literature is scarce in looking specifically at communication barriers encountered by community resource organizations called to respond to communities impacted by the crisis. One particular Delphi study by Pawlowski, Cu, and Scotter (2010) used expert panels of fire fighters and EOC directors to determine the obstacles to interorganizational communication and coordination in disaster response in addition to other questions in regards to emergency response during hurricanes and other major disasters. Their findings showed commonalities in several of the top-ranked issues. In evaluating the responses to barriers in communication, both panels spoke of communication equipment issues (including the failure of communication technology), poor communication issues among agencies (including lack of point of contact and lack of communication resulting in uncompleted tasks), and inaccurate or unreliable information (including inability to acquire accurate reports) as barriers/obstacles in their disaster response efforts.

Often, overcoming barriers to communication involves prior education and knowledge. In Kaser and Johnson (2011) study regarding educating about barriers in order to remove barriers to communication, they stated that understanding barriers to

communication and how to overcome them was essential to achieve effective communication. “An important method of effective communication involves four steps: (1) knowing the barriers to communication, (2) predicting when those barriers may occur within any given communication situation, (3) identifying those barriers when they do occur, and (4) developing strategies to overcome them” (p.1). The results of their study showed that by simply providing education and training about barriers to communication, business students were more prepared to remove barriers in future business relationships.

As previously mentioned, the environment surrounding an organization can also be categorized as a barrier to communication. Robbins (1987) defined environment as “the consideration of factors outside the organization itself” (p. 149). He explains that the environment is defined as “those institutions or forces that affect the performance of the organization, but over which the organization has little control” (p.150). Grunig (1992) argues, “high uncertainty [in an environment] forces organizations to seek information from their environments as well as disseminating information to them” (p. 475). He further explained that organizations must adhere to changes in their environment in order to remain relevant. Robbins (1987) also touches on unstable environments and state that this environmental uncertainty can have a significant impact on an organization and cause the organization to make changes. Adapting to these changes, Grunig (1992) argues, requires two-way symmetrical communication.

### **Science Communication**

Science communication is unique. Topics and messages are often complex and hard to understand. In addition, communicators must work closely with scientists in crafting messages and stressing the importance of relaying their work to the public.

Often science communicators must go beyond traditional communication methods and adopt less formal and more grassroots approaches to communicating science.

Mizumachi, Matsuda, Kano, Kawakami, and Kato (2011) stated “to achieve the objective of effective public dialogue, scientist and the broader spectrum community have been increasingly engaging in a variety of communication activities” (p. 1). In another study, Clarke (2003) conducted a qualitative study in which she suggested a contextual model involving two-way dialogue between farmers and scientists. She held a farm visit, which was kept very informal and facilitated informal group discussions. The one-on-one interaction and the move away from the traditional lecture format were very highly rated by the participants. Results showed that Clarke’s (2003) contextual model of communication a welcome change to bridging the gap between these two audiences.

Grassroots efforts and non-formal communication efforts enable science communicators to garner a better understanding of their audience and determine ways to effectively convey messages.

### **Two-Way Symmetrical Model of Public Relations**

As Fielding (2006) discussed that the involvement of people and an understanding among people was an essential element of effective communication, it can be derived that the two-way communication could lead to effective communication. Dozier and Ehling (1992) addressed this stating, “regarding effectiveness of communication management, the symmetrical model is inherently more efficacious because it assumes that the knowledge, attitude, and behavior of both top management and publics are subject to change” (p. 178). Ulmer, et al. (2011) addressed effective communication in a crisis situation. They said, “Effective communication is not a one-way process. We

advocate that, after a crisis, organizations provide information to stakeholders but also schedule time to listen to their concerns and to answer their questions” (p. 49). The process they advocate is also known as the two-way symmetrical model.

The two-way symmetrical model is the fourth model of public relations and describes “communication that manages conflict and improves understanding with strategic publics” (Grunig, 1992, p. 18). The model is uniquely positioned as it involves both gathering and disseminating information. Grunig and White (1992) further defined the two-way symmetrical model as a way for organizations to form partnerships with publics and a means in which both organization and public “may change their behavior” (p. 39).

### **Excellence Theory**

Excellent communication has been categorized as symmetrical two-way communication. This communication preference is part of Excellence Theory. “Excellence theory by itself has not made public relations a mature science, it has provided a comprehensive paradigm that has integrated and expanded public relations research” (Grunig, J., Grunig, L., & Dozier, 2006, p. 24). The Excellence Theory developed from the Excellence Study conducted in 1984. The International Association of Business Communicators issued a request for proposals (RFP) for a study that would explain “how, why, and to what extent does communication affect the achievement of organizational objectives” (p. 24). This study enabled researchers the ability to construct a grand theory of the value of public relations (Grunig, 1992). This would include a theory that looked at evaluating public relations programs and evaluating the overall contribution of public relations to the organization’s overall effectiveness. The steps taken in developing the theory included integrating a number of middle-range theories

and concepts that explained how public relations managed to increase value to the organization (Grunig, 2006).

Data collection in the Excellence Study was two-fold. The first phase consisted of quantitative, survey research on 327 organization in the US, Canada, and United Kingdom. Included were corporations, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and trade associations. The surveys were then followed-up with qualitative, in-depth interviews with CEOs whose organizations had the most excellent public relations functions.

As it quickly became the comprehensive model of excellence in public relations, it provides a model for public relations departments to evaluate and audit their departments, explain to managers the value of public relations and provide a foundation for teaching public relations (Grunig et al., 2006). The theory argues that for the public relations function to be maximized, it should be organized logically. “Public relations must be organized in a way that makes it possible to identify strategic publics as part of the strategic management process and to build quality long-term relationships with them through symmetrical communication programs” (Grunig, 2006, p. 160). Grunig’s research showed that excellent public relations functions within organizations:

- Public relations should be in (or represented in) the dominant coalition and involved in strategic management
- Public relations should be a management function and not a subheading of another function. If part of a management team, the researchers found that public relations was excellent when public relations collaborated with other functions (Grunig, 2006).
- Employees are satisfied with job and organization (and have a system for internal communication)

- “Organizations with excellent public relations valued women as much as men for the strategic role and developed programs to empower women throughout the organization” (Grunig, 2006, p. 161).
- Organization should have an attention to diversity of race and ethnicity
- Organizations should have an ethics component.

They also found that excellent public relations programs were most effective when strong relationships were built with key publics and that the program added strategic value to the organization. In addition, excellent programs utilized two-way symmetrical communication to manage conflict and continuously communicate with key publics.

In order to determine the value of public relations, the function must be analyzed on at least four different levels including program level, functional level, organizational level and societal level. Overall, “for an organization to be effective, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfies with goals of stakeholders as well as of management” (Grunig, 2006, p. 159). Failure to meet the goals of either could result in stakeholder pressure, causing the organization unwanted risks and costs.

In addition to the placement of public relations within the organization, Excellence Theory also discusses that the value of public relations can be found in the relationships between the organization and its stakeholders. These publics are identified through environmental scanning to determine which publics place value in the decisions made by the organization. Once these publics have been identified, the organization should communicate symmetrically with the public to establish long-term, quality relationships with them (Grunig, 2001).

As this theory has served as the edifice for public relations research, much study has gone into the role of public relations in strategic management and decision-making. The Excellence Theory has spurred many research studies focusing on environmental

scanning (Dozier, 1986; Dozier, 1990) and identifying publics (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984), empowerment of public relations (L. Grunig, 1992), ethics (Shamir, Reed, & Connell, 1990; Wright, 1985; Newsom, Ramsey, & Carroll, 1993), relationship and relationship management (Wilson, 1996), evaluation of public relations efforts (Cutlip, Center, and Broom, 1985), return on investment of public relations activities (Lee & Yoon, 2010; Grunig, 2006), cultivation (Kelly, 1998), and crisis and conflict (Fearn-Banks, 1996; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1992; Marra, 1992). Lastly, more research has evolved regarding public relations best practices based upon the guidelines of the Excellence Theory.

### **Crisis Theory**

Crisis Theory was largely developed from the principles laid out in the Excellence Theory. It basically states that an organization must adopt a crisis management function in order to avoid or be prepared when a crisis does hit. “Researchers say that if an organization maintains the following practices [in Excellence Theory] on an ongoing pre-crisis basis, then either it is in a better position to prevent a crisis or it will suffer less and recover more rapidly from a crisis” (Fearn-Banks, 2001, p. 480). The inability to develop a crisis management plan opens the organization up for serious failures and loss. “To be effective and benefit organizations, crisis management must seek to protect and to aid stakeholders placed at risk by crises or potential crises” (Coombs, 2012, p. 23). Much of what is known of crisis management stems from researchers studying organizations dealing with crisis situations. “The research tends to be composed of lists of what to do and what not to do that are devoid of guiding theory” (Coombs, 2006, p. 172). However, researchers argue that because much of what is written is based on actual experience, it does have a grounded perspective. Coombs (2006) said,

“integrating more theory into a crisis communication will help to demonstrate the danger of utilizing untested recommendations” (p. 193).

In research on crisis situations, such as the DWH oil spill, a good deal of it tends to be case studies where the lessons learned in the crisis situation are applied to the literature on crisis situation. “Applied research seeks to use theory to solve real-world problems” (Coombs, 2012, p.23). Similar studies such as Garnett and Kouzmin (2007) essay on communication efforts during Hurricane Katrina took a multidimensional approach. They studied Hurricane Katrina through four conceptual lenses of crisis communication including crisis communication as an interpersonal influence, crisis communication through media relations, crisis communication through technology showcase, and crisis communication interorganizational network. They concluded that by assessing Hurricane Katrina through the four conceptual lenses of crisis communication “it provided a more comprehensive, balanced view of the crisis” (Garnett & Kouzmin, 2007, p. 185).

However, the big question remains: how do organizations effectively manage a crisis situation? Overarching research questions tend to focus on particular lessons including management involvement in the pre-crisis stage and how it impacted the results and how the organization handled the crisis situation overall. Other research questions studied how an organization fared during a crisis situation without an established crisis communication plan. By following the lessons developed for crisis management, an organization will successfully survive a crisis. If not, the organization will suffer the potential reputation and financial consequences of the crisis situation.

## **Crisis Management**

In developing a crisis management function within an organization, it is important for organizations to address the three sections including pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis. Many of these steps echo the lessons laid out by Ulmer et al., (2011) in the previous discussion regarding effective communication during a crisis. Fern-Banks (2001) discussed that if an organization follows the principles of the Excellence Theory, then they should be prepared for a crisis situation. She suggests several practices needed to be taken by organizations to ensure the organization is prepared for a crisis. As one can see, these are very similar to the principles of the Excellence Theory, but tailored more towards crisis situations. The practices include:

- The public relations head is part of top management
- Programs are designed to build relationships with key stakeholders
- An on-going public relations plan has been developed for each key public
- Develop a strong relationship with the media
- Issues management is part of a two-way symmetrical program
- Two-way symmetrical crisis plan is developed
- Assessing a company's risk communication
- Practices should be part of strategic management of an organization
- Organization anticipates types of crisis that it will suffer
- Organization maintains an open policy with key publics at all times (transparency) (p. 483)

Also as part of the pre-crisis stage, Coombs (2007) argued that an organization should have a crisis management plan that is updated and tested. Within this plan, an organization should have a pre-developed, trained crisis management team and key messages that are ready to go if and when a crisis hits.

In considering crisis response, Coombs (2006) argued that crisis response research is divided into two parts: form and content. He defined form as the planning,

and response time that should be done pre, during, and after a crisis. Content refers to key messages that are given and the actual content of the response.

When developing the form of a response, Coombs provides several lessons including being quick, consistent, and open with all information. He stressed the importance of the organization responding to the crisis as soon as possible in order to appear that they have a handle on the situation and that their messages are heard by the mass media and not by conflicting voices (Coombs, 2006). The second lesson - be consistent - refers to the actual messages that the organizations delivers during a crisis. Much of the literature advises to speak with one voice, but this may not be possible with large-scale crisis situations. Instead, Coombs argued that the crisis management team (which should be developed in the pre-crisis stage) should all be on the same page regarding messages to the public. Lastly, the organization should be open and honest throughout the crisis and maintain a level of transparency. In looking at CROs during the DWH oil spill, it is assumed that each organization had adapted crisis management techniques. Because of the frequencies of natural disasters in this area, emergency and crisis management plans would be expected.

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

Situations, such as natural disaster versus man-made disasters, can affect management of a crisis. In developing content for a response to a crisis, Coombs (2006) pointed to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) to further understand crisis response content. "SCCT is built around protecting the organization's reputation during a crisis. The crisis responses, what an organization says and does after a crisis, will affect its reputation" (p. 175).

The first part of this theory, situational, can be influential in a crisis situation. Situational influences in crisis management situations are important. "There is a long-held belief in communication that the situation influences our selection of communicative responses" (Coombs, 2006, p. 175). In fact, Benson (1988) suggested that crisis research should be studied contextually by determining what response fits best with each situation. The SCCT attempts to do so with three central elements including a list of response strategies, a framework for categorizing situations, and a method for matching the crisis response to the crisis situation (Coombs, 2006, p. 176).

In order to uphold the reputation of the organization, response strategies incorporate being open and honest with the audience. Relationships with key publics should be kept top of mind when developing response strategies, and maintaining the high quality of these relationships should be a top goal. Coombs (2006) suggested several crisis response strategies, including corporate apology (attribution theory), corporate impression management (managing an established reputation), and image restoration theory (reinventing the organization after a crisis situation).

Image restoration theory can continue into the post-crisis phase while the organization is attempting to return to business as usual. It is during this phase that additional information that was promised during the crisis should be provided (Coombs, 2007). In the recovery period, the organization should continue with updates regarding the crisis situation. Lastly, the organization should evaluate its crisis communication efforts during the crisis and update their crisis management plan to accommodate any needed changes.

Although many of the lessons covered in crisis management are based on that of experience, Coombs (2006) argued that re-examining these lessons through research can only enhance the knowledge base of crisis theory and crisis management. Much research has gone into the steps taken and followed during a crisis; however research is lacking in regards the content of those responses.

In addition, researchers are starting to examine crisis beyond post-crisis and look more at pre-crisis strategies. Ulmer (2001), in his case study of an organization who was praised for their crisis communication efforts, discussed this case as a “highly effective and positive crisis management” (p. 592). His findings indicated the importance of stakeholder relationships before a crisis situation. Results of this study “illustrate the importance of developing rich, positive communication relationships with stakeholders on an ongoing basis as a form of crisis preparation” (p. 609). Benefits can include support during a crisis to providing additional channels of communication (Ulmer, 2007). Heath (2007) also argued for the importance of strong stakeholder relationships and the benefits of “mutually beneficial relationships” (two-way symmetrical communication) prior to a crisis (p. 290).

Lastly, Coombs (2006) suggested that researchers should look more specifically at how effective these lessons are in managing a crisis. Doing so will provide practitioners with tried and tested lessons that will serve them well in a crisis situation.

### **Disaster Communication**

The terms “crisis communication” and “disaster communication” are often used interchangeably (Coombs, 2012, p. 59). They are similar in that they both have an obligation to communicate public safety to their stakeholders. However, they start to differ in discussion of vastness of destruction and agency involvement. Coombs argued

that, “while all disasters spawn crises, not all crises are disasters” (p. 59). A disaster, defined by the United States government, is “a dangerous event that causes significant human and economic loss and demands a crisis response beyond the scope of local and State resources. Disasters are distinguished from emergencies by the greater level of response required” (Principles, 2003, sec.2.2). Disasters are events that require resources beyond the community level. This often includes governmental and federal aid. DWH was considered a crisis of national significance, which allowed for federal funds to aid in the cleanup. However, President Obama declared DWH the worst environmental disaster in the U.S. in a statement on 15 June 2010 (Remarks by the President, 2010).

Because of the high level and sheer number of organizations involved in a disaster, coordination and communication can often hinder progress (Vanderford, Nastoff, Telfer, & Bonzo, 2007). In addition, disasters can create crisis situations for public and private organizations, forcing them to engage in their own crisis communication (Coombs, 2012). This communication, although rooted from the larger disaster, will be designed to meet the specific needs of the organization and the organization’s stakeholders.

### **Defining Issues Management**

Issues have been defined by Jones and Chase (1979) as questions that arise out of changes in the environment that wait for major decisions. Given this definition, natural disasters as well as manmade disasters can all be defined as ongoing issues as their impact on the surrounding communities can be severe and long-term. In addition, managing these issues involves a multitude of stakeholders. Heath and Palenchar (2009) define issues management as “the management of organizational and

community resources to advance organizational and community interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with stakeholders and stakeholders” (p. 15). More specifically, Heath (2006) earlier defined issues management as “encompassing all efforts corporations must make to create harmony with key players in their public policy arena by sensing changing standards of the norms of business practice preferred by key publics, especially those that have become activists” (p. 75). Large-scale and long-lived issues can often involve government, public and private organizations. With so many different potential players involved, it is crucial for organizations to plan accordingly.

Issues management research has included best management practices for managing issues (including communicating, and involving stakeholders). The advent of issues management literature has made many organizations be proactive in their strategic planning, and issues management plans have become a norm in many organizations. “If an organization is engaged in issues management before, during, and after a crisis, it can mitigate and perhaps prevent the crisis from becoming an issue by working quickly and responsibly to establish or reestablish the level of control desired by relevant stakeholders” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 278).

### **Issues Management during a Crisis**

Issues management often takes a back seat or is combined with crisis communication and risk management. However, issues management (in some context) has been around for quite some time. “Issues management as an applied discipline is an ancient business and communication practice. For centuries, government leaders as well as business managers have responded to, created, and managed issues as part of their routine activities” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 5). Organizations practiced issues management in some capacity, but did not necessarily give it a name.

Chase (1984) introduced the issue management process model as having five distinct circles, including issue identification, issue analysis, issue change strategy option, issue action programming and evaluation of results. This linear model showed the steps that needed to be taken for the accomplishment of an issue action program goal. His focus on issues management was those issues that needed to be addressed for public policy management. Much of Chase's work was done based on the work of the Public Affairs Council (1978), which introduced the first issues management model as monitoring public policy arena to discover trends, identify issues that may impact an organization, evaluate issues through analysis, prioritizing, creating company response and finally, implementing plans. Heath's (1997) definition of issues management stayed very much in line with the researchers before him. He defined issues management as "the identification, monitoring and analysis of trends in key public's opinions that can mature into public policy and regulative or legislative constraint" (p. 6). Later, Heath and Palenchar (2009) restructured the definition to include the role that stakeholders play in issues management. They define issues management as "the management or organizational and community resources to advance organizational and community interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with stakeholder and stake seekers" (p. 15).

### **Jaques' Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model**

Jaques (2007) argued that an attempt to separate issues management and crisis management by definition alone "fails to capture the full dynamics of the disciplines" (p. 147). He stated that examining them as a process rather than a standard definition provides a better understanding and allows for broader application rather than just reactive tactics to a crisis situation. In his discussion of crisis management and issues

management life cycles, Jaques (2007) stated that a linear model depicting the life cycles of many issues and crisis situations is not ideal that “in reality issue management is inherently not a linear process” (p. 149). Bigelow, Fahey, and Mahon (1993) stated “issues do not necessarily follow a linear, sequential path, but instead follow paths that reflect the intensity and diversity of the values and interests stakeholders bring to an issue and the complexity of the interaction among the factors” (p.29). Given Jaques’ argument against a linear process to address issues management, he proposed an issue and crisis management relational model (Figure 2-2) in which he places preparedness and prevention as part of the model along with reactive and post-crisis tactics. By adopting a relational model, Jaques (2007) said that the two schools of thought regarding the relationship between crisis management and issues management are covered. Jaques (2007) said that the “best way to manage crisis is to understand and manage issues” (p. 152). However, Heath (1997) said that crisis management is one element of issues management and that issues come with a crisis.

Given the complexity and the duration of the DWH oil spill, both arguments ring true with this particular case. Safety issues and blowout preventers were not sufficiently checked which led to the explosion in April 2010 (Barstow, Dodd, Glanz, Saul, & Urbina, 2010). In addition, the duration of the response, capping the oil and the ongoing cleanup has led to many psychological, sociological, economical and environmental issues that small Gulf communities are still addressing today.

The model is centered by the goal of effective crisis management. The steps around the goal are categorized into two broader categories and four smaller sub-categories. The two broad categories are pre-crisis management and crisis

management. The four smaller sub-categories are crisis preparedness, crisis prevention, crisis event management, and post-crisis management. Each of the steps in these categories will be discussed.

### **Planning Processes**

Planning processes in the relational model is a sub-category of the pre-crisis management, crisis preparedness category. This step essentially involves the organization having a crisis communication plan. Jaques (2007) stated that this important first step involves “putting the planning in place, assigning roles and responsibilities, establishing process ownership” (p. 154).

### **Systems and Manuals**

Systems and manuals in the relational model is a sub-category of the pre-crisis management, crisis preparedness category. This step is insuring that the organization has all the necessary tools, material and resources in place to properly manage a crisis. Jaques (2007) discussed that “systems and manuals are no unimportant and are part of the foundation of effective crisis management. Planning is self-evidently much more than manuals” (p.154).

### **Training and Simulations**

Training and simulation in the relational model is a sub-category of the pre-crisis management, crisis prevention category. As its title suggests, this category includes training staff and those that will be involved in the crisis management. Training and simulation also includes hosting drills within organizations to test the crisis management plan (Jaques, 2007).

## **Early Warning Scanning**

Early warning scanning in the relational model is a sub-category of the pre-crisis management, crisis prevention category. Early warning scanning includes environmental scanning as well as organizations and internal scans. Jaques (2007) defined this step as including “processes such as audits, preventive maintenance, issue scanning, social forecasting, environmental scanning, anticipatory management, future studies” (p. 155).

## **Issue and Risk Management**

Issues and risk management in the relational model is a sub-category of the pre-crisis management, crisis prevention category. Much like the previous discussion of issues management, this particular step “includes identification, prioritization, strategy development and implementation” (p. 155).

## **Emergency Response**

Emergency response in the relational model is a sub-category of the pre-crisis management, crisis prevention category. Jaques (2007) defines this at “each organization should have its own criteria for defining when an emergency might become a crisis” (p. 155). Identifying this can ensure for “prompt and effective emergency response” that may lead to crisis prevention (p. 155).

## **Crisis Recognition**

Crisis recognition in the relational model is the first step that moves into the second broad category, crisis management. Crisis recognition is in the sub-category of crisis event management. This step is for the organization to understand when there is a crisis and relies heavily on the previous steps of scanning, monitoring and emergency response. However, Jaques (2007) stated that organizations will often miss the signs of

a scan or there will not be a single emergency to signal a crisis. Therefore, this step is for organizations to “understand and recognize the transition from emergency, objective assessment, early recognition” (Jaques, 2007, p. 156).

### **System Activation/Response**

This step in the relational model is included in the crisis management, crisis incident management category. Once the crisis is recognized in the previous step, the organization should move to this step of activating a response. Jaques (2007) used the example of Hurricane Katrina when “some US Federal authorities initially claimed not to understand its full impact even though everyone else could see it on live television. As a result system activation and response was slow and rightly criticized” (p. 156). Jaques (2007) defined this step as “the activation process, effective mechanisms for call out, availability of back-ups, systems redundancy” (p. 156).

### **Crisis Management**

Crisis management in the relational model is in the crisis management, crisis incident management category. As previously discussed in the crisis management section, this step “includes strategy selection and implementation, damage mitigation, stakeholder management, media response” (Jaques, 2007, p. 156).

### **Recover, Business Resumption**

The last three steps in the relational model are included in the crisis management, post-crisis management category. Recover and business resumption is the first step in this category. Jaques (2007) defined this step as returning to “business as usual” (p. 157). He specifically defines this step as “operational recovery, financial costs, market retention, business momentum, share price protection” (p. 157).

## **Post-Crisis Issue Impacts**

“Post-crisis issues can persist for years or even decades and may impact whole industries” (Jaques, 2007, p. 157). Jaques stated that decisions made in haste during a crisis by an organization can cause future problems for an organization.

## **Evaluation Modification**

The last step in the non-linear model is the evaluation and modification step. This step includes evaluating the crisis and response to the crisis from the very beginning. This step would also involving making changes within the organization or to the crisis management plan based upon lessons learned. This step offers a great opportunity for “genuine corporate learning and systems modification” (p. 157).

## **Issues Management and the DWH Oil Spill**

Heath and Palenchar (2009) define issues management as “the management of organizational and community resources to advance organizational and community interests and rights by striking a mutual balance with stakeholders and stakeholders” (p. 15). As Austin and Leferrier discussed in their February 2011 paper, the complexity, the magnitude, the various stakeholders involved and the duration of this disaster makes it rather unique. Jaques (2007) discussed that “the longer an issue survives, the choices available decrease and the cost of intervention and resolution increases” (p. 148). Analysis of this crisis from beginning to end can provide information on how managing the issue evolved and changed over the course of first response to cleanup over two years later. In addition, issues management goes beyond simply managing the issue internally. It also includes stakeholders and other key publics that have an interest in the organization and/or the issue.

Issues management can be studied with the DWH oil spill for several reasons. To begin with, spill and its aftermath involved several high profile environmental and social issues. Using this definition, oil on the Florida coastline can be considered an issue that needed to be properly managed to keep from becoming a major crisis for that area. In addition, Heath and Palenchar (2009), discuss the evolution of the term “issues management”, arguing that today it is seen as vital to strategic management. Jaques (2012) states that the study of issues management has reached a pivotal moment. He argues that four major trends have been identified that greatly impact how issues management is applied within organizations:

- Migration of the discipline beyond the corporation to government agencies and NGOs
- The impact of social media and the rise of the new community expectations
- Continuing developments in the relationship between issues management and crisis management
- The challenge of how issue management is positioned within organizations and among other management activities. (p. 35)

Given this modern-day take on issues management, the DWH oil spill is the first major disaster in which modern issues management can be studied. The vastness of the disaster can be defined by it encompassing not only organizations that are trying to manage the issue but other stakeholders, including government organizations, news media, practitioners other nonprofit organizations and other community leaders, all of which made it ideal for examining the response. Comfort, Abrams, Camillus and Ricci (1989) discussed the reliance on all organizations including public, private and nonprofit in order to effectively respond to a complex event. The authors discussed the role of the organizations, “each in their own arena to mobilize the resources, equipment and

knowledge needed in response to such a complex event only through combined efforts and reciprocal, professional commitment” (p. 19). The article also dictates that during the time of disaster management, the need for up-to-date and accurate information is crucial. This includes communication efforts among organizations as well as communication to the communities affected.

### **Systems Theory**

Systems theory is essentially defined as an organizational system that can be open to environmental influences (open system) or closed to outside influences (closed system) (Witmer, 2006). For the purpose of this research, the open system will be discussed.

Dozier and Grunig (1992) discussed that systems theory utilizes an “open-systems orientation, in that practitioners collect as well as disseminate information. Information brought into the organization by practitioners is used to make strategic and tactical decisions” (p. 404). Heath and Paenchar (2009) discussed that when looking at information flow, systems theory “argues that in a complex manner, each system seeks balance with all other systems” (p. 10). In an open system, organizations are constantly reacting and adapting the environment around them (Witmer, 2006). “Open systems utilize resources from the environment as input, transform those resources during throughput, and produce an output of some sort” (p. 363).

Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) further discussed that “systems theory emphasizes the interfaces between organizations and their environments, as well as between subsystems within the organizational system and between subsystems and the organizational whole” (p. 71). This relationship between an organization and its environment can be influential in communication efforts. Kennan and Hazelton (2006)

suggested that “communication is essential to the well-being of any organization because it is the central means by which organizations organize and structure themselves and simultaneously adapt themselves to often turbulent environments” (p. 317). Yuchtman and Seashore (1967) argued that organizations must emphasize the process in order to survive and not focus solely on the end product. Using this definition, Grunig et al., (1992) proposed that in order for organizations to be effective, “the organization must be aware of the environmental publics such as customers, suppliers, governmental agencies, and communities and interact successfully with them” (p. 72). This supports the argument that no organization is an island unto itself and must take into consideration the environment around them in order to communicate effectively. Each organization is intertwined and related to one another. However, as outside environmental factors are crucial for the success of the organization, they also have the potential “to disrupt or to at least constrain the operation of the organization” (p. 72).

### **Collaboration Theory**

The term “collaboration” can mean different things depending upon organizations involved and situations. Gajda (2004) defined collaboration as having the “capacity to empower and connect fragmented systems for the purposes of addressing multifaceted social concerns” (p. 66). However, she argued that the definition can be rather elusive and have different meanings in different situations. She also argues that because of the elusive definition that true collaboration can be difficult to put into practice and evaluate its effectiveness. However, the power of the potential of collaboration is not disputed. “By working together, individual entities can pool scarce resources and duplication of services can be minimized in order to achieve a vision that would not otherwise be possible to obtain as separate actors working independently” (Gajda, 2004, p. 67). Gray

(1985) defined collaboration to mean the sharing of information and resources among different organizations, with similar missions in order to reach a specific goal or solve a specific problem, which neither organization could solve independently (p. 912.). In addition, the dictionary definition for “networking” can mean the exchange of information, services among a set group or individuals or organizations (Webster, 1995, p. 349).

Grunig and Grunig (1992) discussed that the two-way symmetrical model of public relations “is a process of collaboration” (p. 315). Much of their discussion centered on conflict management and disputes. However, they acknowledge the role of collaboration in a successful two-way symmetrical exchange. Similar to definitions defined by other researchers, they used Conrad’s (1985) definition of collaboration which states that collaboration is “all parties believing that they should actively and assertively seek a mutually acceptable solution and being willing to spend large amounts of time and energy to reach such an outcome” (p. 243). Regardless of the definition, a common theme among them all is the ability to come together to achieve a greater vision or goal than a single organization could attain.

Alter (2008) discussed that all nonprofits need to collaborate in order to survive. “Regardless of their size or mission, organizations must build collaborations and networks with other organizations to manage the external task environment, adapt to fast changing conditions and acquire resources essential for the organization’s survival” (p. 435). In the literature that touched on profit/nonprofit collaborations, it states that this type of partnership is a positive way to survive an economic downturn or a major disaster or emergency. However, many non-profits may be reluctant to form such

partnerships for reasons of time and energy involved to make the relationship work. “Many nonprofits avoid them (non-profit partnerships) saying they worry about losing their identities or spending inordinate amounts of time and energy to make such relationships work” (Whelan, 2008). This worry over loss of individual identities can make coming together hard. Merging of leadership styles and personalities can spell disaster for many organizations. Collaboration theorists argue that collaboration efforts are a process because of the “stickiness” of some of the situations. True collaboration and the relinquishing of something personal for a greater goal is the ultimate level of collaboration, but is very hard to obtain. The level of true partnership is determined by goals and structure (Gajda, 2004).

Gajda (2004) discussed that deciding to collaborate is personal as much as it is systematic. “Collaboration depends upon positive personal relations and effective emotional connections between partners. Trust is developed between partners only when there is time, effort, and energy put into the development of an accessible and functioning system for communication” (p. 69). Trust becomes a key phrase when discussing collaboration theory and the reasons that organizations come together. Kapucu (2006) suggested that “communities that have strong working relationships on a daily basis will function better in disaster situations. Trust is crucial in the uncertain situations caused by an extreme event” (p. 209). Kapucu (2006) suggest that trust is built best when it is done prior to a disaster and suggests that communication is crucial in initial development and sustainability of the collaboration.

Kapucu (2006) illustrates his point by discussing the collaborative efforts of organizations during the World Trade Center attack in 2001. In total, 1607 organizations

were involved in the response effort. “Notable in these findings is the large number of nonprofit organizations, 1196, and private domestic organizations, 149, that were involved in the response operations” (p. 213). Kapucu (2006) speaks to the work of these organizations was to simply solve immediate problems after such an extreme disaster. These collaborations were flexible to the situation and simply worked to solve problems (Kapucu, 2006). He concludes by stating, “nonprofit organizations, partnering with public organizations and stimulating civic participation, played an important role in the 9/11 response operations” (p. 218).

Following an inter-organizational study of collaboration among four neighborhood human service organizations, Galaskiewicz and Shatin (1981) found that relations among such organizations could also be considered through the context of networking. This theory argues that the interpersonal relationships of organizational leadership have a direct impact on the type and level of collaborative ventures undertaken by the organization, particularly during turbulent economic times. As Galaskiewicz and Shatin (1981) noted:

Under conditions of turbulence and uncertainty, leaders will target their networking efforts on the basis of who they know personally or who they believe share their loyalties and personal values. Organizational leaders will still try to negotiate the “best deal” in terms of resource exchange; however, circumstances will force them to pay special attention to the dependability and trustworthiness of their exchange partners. (p. 435)

Alter (2008) also argued that collaborations are often formed based on personal relationships. In her description of the different forms of inter-organizational relationships (IOR), she stated that the most basic form, the obligational IOR is the infant state of such relationships and are “loosely linked, informal and may depend on

personal and friendship relationships” (p. 436). Often these relationships are built on organizations asking, “what is in this collaboration for me?”

Coming together for environmental situations has become a growing trend in the past century. Cox (2010) discussed that “in hundreds of communities across the country, citizens, environmentalists, business leaders, and public officials are experimenting with new approaches to public participations in environmental disputes” (p. 120). Often this means putting opponents across the round table from one another to reach a mutually beneficial consensus for all parties that are involved. Collaboration theorists would consider this the ultimate step of the collaboration process. Inter-organizational networks can enable diverse organizations and groups to collaborate around a shared vision and purpose to bring about positive impact. (Kapucu, 2006, p. 207). Heath and Palenchar (2009) stated that the work of organizations together have been effective in managing an issue. They stated “that the best management of any issue is to make appropriate changes in collaboration with groups and organizations that have aligned interests during the issue discussion” (preface, p.x).

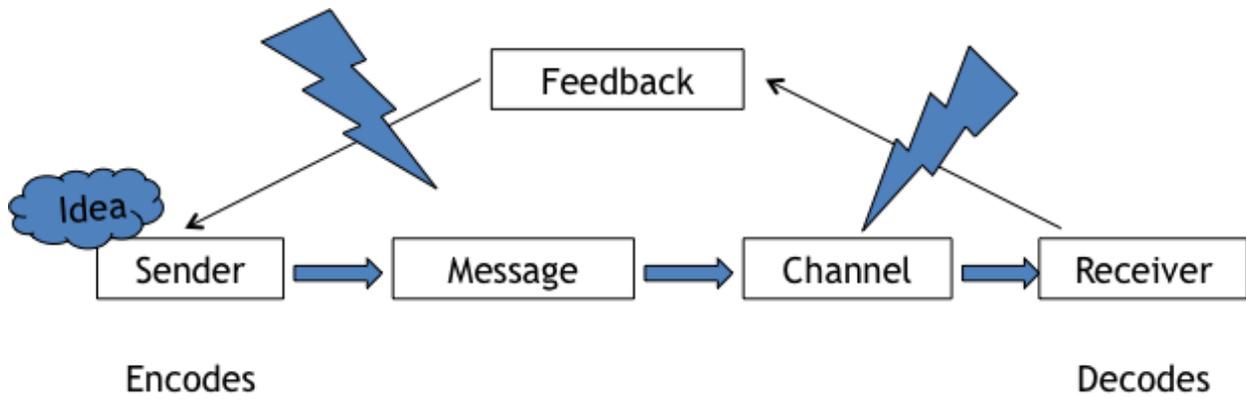


Figure 2-1. Shannon-Weaver Communication Model, 1949

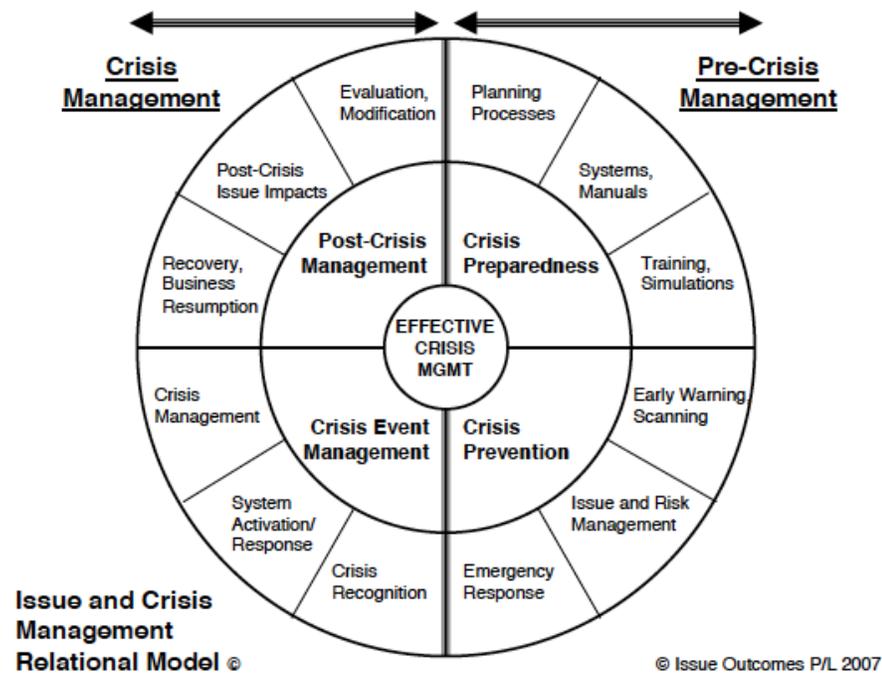


Figure 2-2. Issues and Crisis Management Relational Model, Jaques, 2007

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

In this chapter, the methods utilized for the research are discussed. The chosen approach to this research, case study, is regarded as a “comprehensive research strategy” and data gathering techniques for this particular study will be discussed (Yin, 1994, p. 13). In addition, this chapter will include data collection and sampling methods that were utilized. Furthermore, a discussion regarding data units and data analysis is included. Finally, the chapter includes a subjectivity statement by the researcher.

### **Qualitative Research**

The use of qualitative research in the advancement of the knowledge base in communication studies is beneficial as it allows researchers to study current trends and how these trends have changed over the course of time. Flick (2002) said that changes in society forces researchers to look at more inductive (rather than quantitative deductive) approaches. “Rapid social change and the resulting diversification of life worlds are increasingly confronting social researchers with new social contexts and perspectives. Traditional deductive methodologies are failing and thus research is increasingly forced to make use of inductive strategies instead of starting from theories and testing them” (p. 2).

Qualitative and quantitative research varies in different ways. Philosophically, they stem from different philosophical assumptions. These differences determine the ways researchers approach problems and collect data (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). Quantitative research originated in positivism or a belief that general principles govern the social and physical world. Typically, researchers use these principles to predict human behavior by measuring and gathering data. Qualitative research

originated in phenomenology or a belief that social reality is unique and interconnected. Qualitative researchers focus on determining how others think or feel and make an effort to experience what happens to them (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). Rooted in the qualitative research belief that social reality is unique and interconnected, Hatch (2002) defined five research paradigms: positivist, postpositivist, constructivists, critical/feminist, and poststructuralists.

Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) said qualitative and quantitative research both approach studies by stating a purpose, defining a problem or question, identifying a population, collecting and analyzing data, and report results. However, differences lie in “their views about the nature of reality, their assumptions about the role of the researcher and in how they define knowledge” (p. 449). Qualitative research seeks to understand social and human behavior from an insider’s perspective. It states that human behavior is bound to the context in which it occurs or the social reality and rejects generalizations. The ultimate goal of qualitative research is to portray the complex pattern in depth and detail so that someone unrelated can understand. Quantitative research strives for testable and confirmable theories that explain phenomena by showing how derived from theory.

Methodologies between quantitative and qualitative research are different. Quantitative research includes experimental research, in which an independent variable is manipulated to determine the effect it had on a dependent variable, and nonexperimental research, in which variables are not manipulated, but the researcher examines potential relationships among them. Types of nonexperimental research include correlational research, ex post facto, and survey research. Qualitative research

methods include ethnography (field research), case study research, content analysis and naturalistic observation, which include phenomenologic studies, grounded theory, and historical research.

The role of the researcher is a large difference between qualitative and quantitative research. As previously discussed, in quantitative research, the role of the researcher is detached, impartial, and objective. In qualitative research, the researcher is personally involved and empathic. “Qualitative investigators think they can get closer to the actor’s perspective through detailed interviewing and observation. They said that quantitative researchers are seldom able to capture their subjects’ perspective because they have to rely on more remote, inferential empirical methods and materials” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 12).

### **Case Study**

The DWH oil spill was the largest man-made environmental disaster in U.S. waters to date. The devastation of this disaster impacted Gulf Coast communities both economically and environmentally. Given its magnitude, complexity and duration, the DWH oil spill provides a unique opportunity to study nonprofit issues management. “Case study methods involve systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how it operates or functions” (Berg, 2001, p. 225). Yin (2009) provided additional support for case study as a method in social science research. “The case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (p. 4). Hatch (2002) cautioned that the term “case study” is often used when, in fact, the researcher is using ethnography or participant observation. He cautioned that researchers make the distinction when doing case study research. Yin

(2009) said that the difference lies in the fieldwork done by both ethnographies and case studies. Ethnographies rely on an extended amount of field time doing participant observations, whereas “case studies are a form of inquiry that does not depend solely on ethnographic or participant-observer data” (p. 15).

Case study has its home in qualitative research, but Yin (2009) explained that it goes beyond recognized qualitative methods by often including a mix of quantitative and qualitative evidence (p.19). “Case studies need not always include the direct and detailed observational evidence marked by other forms of qualitative research” (p. 19).

Case studies are differentiated from other qualitative studies simply by how the case is defined. “Case studies are a special kind of qualitative work that investigates a contextualized contemporary (as opposed to historical) phenomenon within specified boundaries” (Hatch, 2002, p.30). These specified boundaries and “a specified unit of analysis is the key decision point in case study design” (p. 30).

Stake (1995) said case studies fit into three different types, including intrinsic, instrumental and collective. For the purpose of this particular study, the focus was on instrumental. Berg (2001) described instrumental case as simply a means to an end to further understand a theoretical question or concern. “The intention is to assist the researcher to better understand some external theoretical question or problem” (Berg, 2001, p.229). He went on to define that the researcher’s “choice for a particular case for study is made because the investigator believes that his or her understanding about some other research interest will be advanced” (p. 229). The researcher chose an instrumental case study to better understand the communication barriers encountered by CROs during a major environmental disaster. As shown in Chapter 2, literature

regarding single, managerial barriers to communication in crisis situations is prevalent, but very little regarding the role that CROs play in communicating to affected communities. Therefore, using an instrumental case study approach, the researcher was able to understand what CROs encountered during this particular environmental disaster and how those results may further issues management and crisis management theory.

Yin (1994) defined three approaches to case study design. These include exploratory, explanatory, and descriptive case studies. This particular study works best with the explanatory design in that it utilized “pattern matching where several pieces of information from the same case may be related to some theoretical disposition” (Berg, 2001, p. 230). This pattern matching was utilized within the data collected.

When conducting case study research, the questions regarding objectivity and generalizability arise. The question of objectivity is often brought up in discussions regarding qualitative research and many researchers have answered questions regarding objectivity with detailed descriptions of data collection, so that the study could be replicated. In case study research, Berg (2001) argues that “the investigator clearly articulates what areas have been investigated, and through what means” (p. 232). He further discussed that given the errors in the research, subsequent research will bring those errors to light. Given this, data collection procedures linked to this particular research have been carefully detailed in the data collection section below.

**Using case study to build theory.** Yin (2009) stated “theory development as part of the design phase is essential” (p. 35). He stated that case study theory development differs from related methods such as ethnography or grounded theory. These methods

do not introduce theories prior to data collection, but instead introduce theory after data collection. Yin (2009) argued that in order to make contacts for data collection, the researcher needs to have “an understanding-or theory-of what is being studied” (p. 35). Theory simply provides a roadmap for the study. Eisenhardt (1989) agreed that case study research is used to build “theoretical constructs, propositions and/or midrange theory from case-based, empirical evidence” (p. 25). She said that because case study research comes from current happenings and presents a story that “building theory from cases is likely to produce theory that is accurate, interesting and testable” (p. 26). Using case studies to develop theory has essentially three strengths, including uniqueness of the theory, testability of the emergent theory, and an empirically valid theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). The process of constantly checking the data from the case study with the predetermined constructs of the theory makes this method popular as it will often force the researcher to look beyond preconceived notions (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Case study research is a popular strategy utilized for communication and public relations research and more specifically, for crisis management research. An and Cheng (2012) discussed that “many crisis communication researchers indeed have employed this research form to examine specific crisis situations, analyze the background and social contexts, and evaluate management results” (p. 69). Cutler (2004) noted that case study research accounted for almost one-third of the papers in public relations research journals.

### **Research Design**

This study was a single-case design focusing on the DWH oil spill and the community response in the Florida Panhandle. Yin (2009) discussed that the rationale for studying a single case often lies in the uniqueness of the case. As with other social

science research, Yin (2009) defined construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability as important tests that require complete attention when doing case study research. “For case studies, an important revelation is that the several tactics to be used in dealing with these tests should be applied throughout the subsequent conduct of the case study, not just at its beginning. Thus the ‘design work’ for case studies may actually continue beyond the initial design plans” (Yin, 2009, p. 41).

### **Primary and Secondary Data**

Yin (2009) stated that to meet the test of construct validity, several tactics should be used including multiple sources of data, establishing a chain of evidence and data checks (p. 41). Several sources of primary and secondary data were used for this particular study. Primary data included in-depth interviews with community leaders in the Florida Panhandle. Secondary data included documentation provided by community leaders in addition to documentation that was obtained from the Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum in April, 2012.

In addition to including multiple sources of data, Yin (2009) suggested establishing a chain of evidence, which is very similar to Berg’s (2001) suggestion that data collection should be very detailed. Yin (2009) went on to explain chain of evidence as one way to increase the reliability of the case study research. He argues that an “external observer should be able to follow the derivation of any evidence from initial research questions to ultimate case study conclusions” (p. 122). The details and chains of events should be explained in such a way that the observer can follow from the conclusions back to the research questions. In order to utilize this tactic, the data collection methods will be explained in great detail.

Final tactic suggested for construct validity was to have key informants to perform checks of interview data reports. Member checks were done for interviews by having interviewees review key statements and conclusions prepared by the interviewer at the end of each interview.

### **Building on Case Study Research**

Case study research often provides the researcher with a unique opportunity to “develop insight into basic aspects of human behavior” (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006, p. 457). This is possible because of the roots of case studies in reality and natural phenomena. By examining one particular instance, case studies can often be viewed as gaining knowledge and/or developing a hypothesis that can be tested later (Ary et al., 2006).

In order to gather knowledge for future study, Yin (2009) suggested pattern matching, explanation building, rival explanations. and rival models as potential tactics. Explanation building can be defined as explaining the case and presenting it in such a way that encourages future study. Yin (2009) said

Eventual explanation is likely to be the result of a series of iterations including making an initial theoretical statement or an initial proposition about policy or social behavior, comparing the findings of an initial case against such as statement or proposition, revising the statement or proposition, comparing other details of the case against revision, comparing the revision to the facts of a second, third, or more cases and repeating this process as many times as needed. (p.143)

In addition, Yin (2009) stated that in order to reduce bias or errors in case study research, the researcher should “make as many steps as operational as possible and to conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder” (p. 45). He went on to relate this step as if an auditor will be looking over research as a later date. In order to ensure reliability for this particular study, the researcher kept a notebook of

the steps that were taken in data collection. These steps are presented in the data collection section. In addition to keeping a notebook of steps and performing member checks, explanation building was utilized by thoroughly presenting the case, analyzing the data, and presenting the results as a foundation for continuing research.

### **Case Material**

Wimmer and Dominick (2006) discuss that “simply put, case study uses as many data sources as possible to systematically investigate individuals, groups, organizations, or events” (p. 137). Table 3.1 gives a breakdown of the different data sources and case material that were used for this particular case study. Yin (2009) stated “the use of multiple sources of evidence in case studies allows an investigator to address a broader range of historical and behavioral issues” (p. 115). Patton (2002) stated that multiple data sources are one type of triangulation in studies. Yin (2009) further defined triangulation, “collect information from multiple sources but aimed at corroborating the same fact or phenomenon” (p. 116).

### **In-Depth Interviews**

Qualitative interviews were chosen for their ability to “allow the researcher to understand the meaning that everyday activities hold for people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 102). Tellis (1997) said that interviews serve as crucial part of case study research for their ability to gain insight on events and decisions that were made during the case. Because of this, qualitative, in-depth interviews tend to be more like conversations in which the researcher not only records the answers to the questions, but also makes note of how the interviewee frames the answer. For this study, the interview guide was developed for semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was

created with several open-ended questions to allow the researcher the freedom to change up the wording and flow of questions in order to fit with the conversation.

Interviewees were chosen through a purposeful sample of community leaders in the Florida Panhandle. Community leaders were defined as those individuals that held senior level positions in a local CRO. The researcher contacted 20 community members electronically and asked for his or her participation in the study. Of the 20 contacted, nine agreed to participate in the in-depth interviews. Morse (1994) indicated that a sufficient sample size for qualitative studies is “more than six” (p. 225). Organizations that were represented by the interviews included umbrella organizations, governmental entities, state associations, environmental groups, service nonprofit organizations, and faith-based organizations.

The researcher worked individually with each participant to secure a convenient and acceptable meeting time and location. Logistics regarding time and location were communicated electronically about two weeks before the interview. A week before the scheduled interview, the researcher sent out an electronic reminder to each participant. The week of the interview, the researcher called each of the participants to verify meeting time and location. Each participant was sent an informed consent and asked to sign. The signed consent was collected at the interview.

Interviews were conducted 14 August 2012 – 20 August 2012. Of the interviews conducted, eight interviews were done in-person at the office of the community leader and one interview was done via Skype. The Skype interview was scheduled after the originally scheduled in-person interview had to be re-scheduled. The length of the interviews varied from 30 to 90 minutes. At the conclusion of each of the interviews, the

researcher briefly went over a summary of the interview and asked if this was a valid representation. All interviewees agreed. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed. In addition, field notes were taken by the researcher during and after each interview.

### **Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum**

As part of the Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities: Health Impact of Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in Eastern Gulf Coast Communities, one early goal for the COD Core was to host a Regional Forum in which community leaders from the Florida Gulf Communities were invited to come to a participatory meeting to discuss several different aspects of the DWH oil spill that closely related to the grant's research areas.

The Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum was held on 26 April 2012 at four different locations: Cantonment, Apalachicola, Santa Rosa Beach, and Gainesville, Florida. The purpose of the Regional Forum was to work with community leaders in those areas to develop approaches and strategies for managing future disasters, discuss Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities project plans, identify research products that benefit communities, and network with other stakeholders throughout the eastern Gulf Coast.

Three discussion topics were introduced at each location. The topics were in alignment with the research projects that are currently being done as part of the Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Grant. These topics included 1) individual and family resiliency after environmental disasters, 2) community health and resiliency, or 3) seafood safety. During the forum, participants worked in small groups with other community stakeholders interested in that topic. A moderator at each location was able to walk each of the groups through strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats

(SWOT) needs assessment and a strategic direction segment. In addition, table leaders were present at each table to help facilitate conversation, take notes, and answer questions. At the conclusion of the day, all the sites came together to share their insights and discuss further direction and next steps.

About 60 community representatives participated, along with 35 project personnel/Extension/SeaGrant/graduate students. Community representatives included staff and volunteers from local nonprofit organizations, representatives from local non-governmental agencies, concerned citizens, and state and local policy makers.

The day began at 8:30 a.m. and concluded around 3:00 p.m. Field notes, audio recordings, and flip charts were used at each of the meetings. Data collected included transcription of the audio was done for the two of the locations: Apalachicola, and Pensacola, Florida. Field notes were available from each of the three locations and were taken by table leaders and/or volunteers who were in attendance. Lastly, flip charts were analyzed and included as data.

### **Supporting Documents**

At each interview, the researcher asked for supporting documents to share for the purpose of the research. Of the nine participants, eight provided the researcher with documents related to the questions asked during the interview. Compilation of all the documents resulted in 26 supporting documents from eight of the community resource organizations that participated in the study. These materials included both internal and external documents focused on communicating with different audiences about impacts from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. These documents including internal communication plans, brochures explaining services to external audiences, internal documents regarding numbers served since DWH.

## **Instrument**

An interview guide was developed for a semi-structured interview. The interview was developed based-upon discussions, comments, and questions at the Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum. The guide included 17 questions broken in to four sections: learning about the organization, discussing the DWH oil spill in relation to their organization, their stakeholders, and news media coverage and their organization. Each questions had 4 to 5 probes each. The interview guide was pilot tested by a community leader that was not included in the interview sample.

## **Data Analysis**

Weiss (1994) suggested that the first step in analyzing case study data is to look at all the data together. Baxter and Jack (2008) remarked that failing to do this step fails to report the case as a whole. Miles and Huberman (1994) argued that actual qualitative analysis begins when data collection begins. They argue that developing categories, writing notes and making inferences all happen while the data is being collected. Data was analyzed using the constant comparative method, which draws categories or themes from the social science data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) proposed a method for the “initial, systematic discovery of the theory from the data of social research” (p. 3). This discovery would lead to categories, which would continue to be built upon as the researcher studied the data. Kelle (2007) highlighted two main rules from Glaser and Straus’ *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. They said that categories should “emerge in the ongoing process of data analysis. Categories should not be forced” (p. 193). They also stated that “a sociologist should employ theoretical sensitivity, which means the ability to see relevant data and to reflect upon empirical data material with the help of theoretical terms” (p. 193).

The most common form of category building is coding and the constant comparison of the emergent codes and themes (Kelle, 2007). Coding for grounded theory differs from traditional coding, which uses a predetermined set of codes. Glaser and Strauss (1967) said that this type of coding “is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting many categories, properties and hypothesis about general problems,” thereby allowing multiple codes to emerge from the data during the analysis (p. 104). The constant comparative of categories comes into play while coding. “The analysts constantly compares the already coded incidents (which usually means the text segments which related to the incidents) with each other and with incidents not yet coded” (Kelle, 2007, p. 194). Glaser and Strauss (1967) said that it is this constant comparative step that provides “theoretical properties of the category” (p. 106). Once categories are determined, Kelle (2007) suggested “researchers are encouraged to find major categories by carefully comparing the initially found categories (which may later become subcategories) and by integrating them into a larger structure” (p.194). This larger structure becomes the resulting theory. Hood (2007) summarized Glaser and Straus’ key components of grounded theory. Glaser and Sraus’ cautioned that theory from this type of analysis is developed inductively and not tested. However, they stated that in order to develop the theory, it must be “refined and checked by the data” (p. 154).

By using the constant comparative method as a guide, the researcher began data analysis by combining all data together before the actual analysis. The CROs will serve as the unit of analysis. Data was combined to ensure triangulation and to minimize the risk of analyzing each data source independently. Once all data was collected and

combined, the researcher continued the analysis by allowing categories to emerge from the data. Data was read through while making notes for categories in the margin and highlighting key quotes and statements that would support categories. This step was considered complete when data had reached saturation and no new categories had emerged. Then data was read through several times to combine categories, and narrow down key data. Once data was reduced, the researcher developed a coding sheet with categories and key quotes and statements that supported categories. Once the coding sheet was filled, the researcher then looked at the categories together and began to develop a structure including all the major and sub-major categories. This structure was then studied and analyzed with relevant theories.

### **Subjectivity Statement**

Interest in the role that CROs play in crisis management and environmental disasters is the merging of the researcher's passions and background. Currently and while conducting this research, the researcher is working with National Institute and Environment Health Grant, Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities (HGHC): Health Impact of Deepwater Horizon Spill in Eastern Gulf Coast Communities in which her job is focused on community outreach in those communities impacted by the DWH oil spill. Special attention is paid to how best to communicate with these communities and learn how they communicate with their target audiences. The community resource organizations in these areas have become true partners as they continue to work diligently to help their community recover and repair. It is the hope of the researcher to continue to work with the organizations and provide them with research-based best management practices that will enable them to help communities now and prepare them for future disasters.

Table 3-1. Data collected and sources

Data collected	From
Field notes	Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum
Flip chart notes	Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum
Meeting transcription <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About 40 participants</li> </ul>	Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum
Interview transcripts <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview 1 thru Interview 9</li> </ul>	In-depth interviews with community leaders
Interview field notes	Field notes taken by the researcher during the In-depth interviews with community leaders
Document 1 thru Document 26	Supporting documents from community leaders regarding barriers to communication or communication efforts during the DWH oil spill

## CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to determine the barriers to effective communication encountered by community resource organizations in the Florida Panhandle. In addition, this study was interested in learning the tactics taken by the organizations to overcome these barriers to communicate to the communities they serve. As indicated in the previous chapter, given the complexity and duration of the DWH oil spill, a case study was utilized to thoroughly study the different aspects of this disaster.

The case study was broken into three different sections, including information gathered from the Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Regional Forum held in April, 2012; in-depth interviews conducted in August 2012; and documents from community resource organizations regarding their communication efforts. Each set of data was analyzed and the constant comparative method was utilized to determine major categories and sub-categories. The categories that emerged are described with supporting material from the data.

### **The DWH Oil Spill as a Case Study**

Given the complexity of the spill, utilizing the case study method to study the DWH oil spill was very appropriate. As Sanders (1981) explained, "Case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects, and programs and to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object" (p. 44). By analyzing each of the data within the case study, the researcher was able to provide more in-depth answers to the research questions. In addition, this study will serve as a foundation for answering more complex questions regarding an organization's ability to communicate about a complex environmental issue.

## **In-Depth Interview Participants**

Senior management in CROs in the Florida Panhandle served as interview participants in the in-depth interviews. A total of nine in-depth interviews were conducted. Demographics of each of the participants are as follows:

- Interview 1 – male; He serves as director of an educational/service organization in one county. The work of this organization is to work in the community and with other CROs to provide educational trainings and resources.
- Interview 2 – male; He serves as program director in a service organization. The work of this organization is provide financial assistance and training for low-income citizens in a one-county area.
- Interview 3 – female; She serves as senior program director of an educational/service organization in one county. The work of this organization is to provide education training, services, and programs for community members.
- Interview 4 – male; He serves as director of an umbrella organization in one county. The work of this organization is to assist the community with recovery efforts following a disaster.
- Interview 5 – male; He serves as director of a faith-based organization. The organization covers the Florida Panhandle. The work of the organization provides assistance to the community through education, financial, and targeted programs.
- Interview 6 – male; He serves as director of a chapter of a larger activist organization. Their work focuses on education and volunteer programs in the Florida Panhandle.
- Interview 7 – male; He serves as senior program director of an umbrella organization in one county. The work of the organizations focuses on assisting the county with recovery efforts following a disaster.
- Interview 8 – male; He serves as director of a social service organization that provides financial and educational services to low-income families in one county.
- Interview 9 – female; She serves as director of a chapter of a larger, national organization. The work of the organization is to provide smaller, service organizations with funding, education, and targeted programs. This organization serves one county.

## **Barriers to Communication**

Communication was consistently named as a weakness by participants in their CRO's response to the DWH oil spill. Statements regarding inability to communicate or not adequately communicating internally and externally were discovered among the data. Several organizations spoke on communication effectiveness at several levels and at different points in time during the response to DWH oil spill. "In any half-direction review, you're going to find communication, communication, communication as a key issue. I am confident that we didn't communicate sufficiently for the event itself, the deployment of volunteers" (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Overall categories for barriers to effective communication, (Figure 4-1) include news media, lack of accurate information, ineffective communication efforts, lack of control over information and uniqueness of the situation. Subcategories were identified as local news media and national news media, credibility of sources, hard to reach audiences, and unique audiences, social media, lack of resources, and no immediate need. Each of these major categories and subcategories will be discussed below.

### **News Media**

Much of the data discussed that news media was to blame for the negative perception. "Media was awful, particularly TV. The media has no positive focus. Negativity is the norm" (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Participants reported that communicating to different audiences was difficult because of the negative perception in the public. They stated that the public was quick to resort to a panic state and were not listening to all reports. In developing communications for their audiences, participants reported that they "underestimated that public perception is reality" (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

A Regional Forum participant commented that, “media was empowered to influence public perceptions” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Other comments regarding news media fueling the public’s negative perception included:

Newspapers have unnecessarily alarmed the public that didn’t need to be alarmed to it. Panic was fueled by the media and there was unfounded panic through the media and then there was no retraction of the media once everything died down. The media’s need for a good story always trumps reality. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

Comments showed that an already established negative perception was difficult to control and account for when developing messages for their audiences. “The constant media sometimes was more contributed to more worry than was necessary and more false information being spread around than was correct” (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

The news media was also discussed in terms of poor working relationship and not having a relationship prior to the DWH oil spill. “We need to work with the media. Media doesn’t work in rural communities. Come talk to us face to face. Government and responding agencies needed to get ahead of the media cycle before they jumped to conclusions. At all levels, the local voice was left out” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). In addition to establishing a connection with the news media, comments showed that a lack of news media training forced them to stay away from opportunities to speak to the media.

I don’t talk to the media because I don’t have media training. Whenever they ask me I’m like talk to this other person, they are our media contact because I am scared to death of saying something that is [going] to get [twisted] out there. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

Several organizations spoke to the presence of the news media and how working off a prepared crisis communication plan was not possible because of the overpowering presence of the news media.

We were out on the beaches and literally had [a state newspaper] out there taking pictures, doing interviews, same with some other television news outlets were out there in force with their satellite trucks and the whole nine yards taking video, doing interviews, etc. In that particular case, there was no opportunity to ensure that there was one voice to the media. We were pretty much on our own. (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

**National versus local coverage.** As this disaster was covered extensively at the local and national level, questions were asked regarding the impact of coverage on communication efforts. Interestingly, comments showed the difference between the coverage of local versus national news media.

We had very conflicting messages as we saw what was actually going to happen, and we felt the real impact. The national media seemed to be saying, "Oh this is terrible. It's ruining the beaches. Everything's bad." Local media was saying, "Well, it wasn't as bad as we thought it was going to be". (Interview 9, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

Several indicated that while local coverage was often trying to ease anxiety and fears, national news media reports were hurting businesses and increasing anxiety.

National coverage was hurting us big time. They were announcing how the Gulf of Mexico was cesspool of oil and it's never going to recover. The national news was just playing it up so much bigger than it was instead of trying to say okay here are the impacted areas. Nobody was buying seafood and we never saw a drop of oil. (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012).

Many of the people were just so overwhelmed with [it]. I mean, oh god, anytime, 24 hours a day, you turn on the TV and down on the bottom left of the TV is the picture of the oil and people were just overwhelmed. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

There was a lot of sensationalism in the national media that made things sound worse than they were or make it feel like they were worse than they were. I mean things were not great, but that external influence of things was

pretty bad. It stressed people out. We treated a lot of anxiety. (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

### **Lack of Accurate Information**

Comments consistently showed that the lack of fact-based information was a large barrier to communication. “Communication was lacking, not necessarily because it didn’t exist, but because no one was releasing it” (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Several organizations agreed that there was a need for accurate information to share with their stakeholders.

They [stakeholders] needed to know the water and the beach were safe or not so they could make decisions. That was so left to guesswork, and it didn’t have to be. We could have had actual data about where is the oil today? How much is present? And that information wasn’t available to the people. So the very first thing we needed was actual, credible information about where is it? How dangerous is it? (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012).

I would rather put out information that’s inaccurate and potentially save somebody the health risks than put their health at risk because I was afraid to put out erroneous information, but that was the government’s – I say government, it could have been BP. It was a joint leadership. I really feel that was a letdown at that level. (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

One Regional Forum participant reported, “There was a lack of accurate information. It was hard to shift between what was real and what was rumor. People latch on the most catastrophic news and believe rumors” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Other indicted that this lack of accurate information led to a great deal of the stress and anxiety in their communities.

I’d say the biggest [need of stakeholders during the DWH oil spill] was reliable communication to what’s going on. The biggest frustration and it led probably to a lot of the stress and anxiety and depression, is we were told immediately it’s [oil] coming no ifs, ands, or buts. (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012).

Many blamed news media for reporting false information. Flip chart data from the Regional Forum reported that the “media was mis-reporting and reporting rumors.”

Other data sources echoed this statement with concerns about the inability to receive information.

There was poor communication throughout the process. It was difficult to know what was happening and also how to respond. How am I going to be affected, when is this going to happen, too fast, and all those things. There was also limited access to information and opportunities for some groups. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

[Our stakeholders] wanted reassurance that the beach wasn't ruined forever, that the entire ecosystem wasn't destroyed. That they weren't all gonna get cancer. That they were never going to be able to – for their kids to play in the Gulf again. They needed reassurance and I couldn't provide because I didn't know the answers either. (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

“We were inundated with questions about how safe was the beach? Especially early in the spill, there were no answers to that question. We didn't have information to give people” (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012).

As receivers of information, one community member at the Regional Forum mentioned that information overload was a huge problem. “You can probably get the correct information. It's just hard to sift through all the information” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). This indicated that target audiences had a difficult time understanding what fact was and what was fiction. To further illustrate this point, another Regional Forum participant indicated that,

Information was coming from so many different sources. There was so much fiction associated with fact. And then, in terms of how you learned about it, it is kind of comical but true, CNN, MSNBC, FOX, local people, newspaper and looking back at what you need, you need someone on the ground [you need] experts to be able to offer informed communication about what was taking place. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

Once BP began the payout process, other problems arose in communication. Community members were unsure of the process and began to call CROs for assistance with the process. However, CROs were also unsure of the process and were not able to obtain accurate information to relay to community members.

They [BP] were beginning their claim process, which was the biggest joke on the planet. When it comes to people in economic crisis, particular people low income, low wage, it was so convoluted in terms of how to access that. (Interview 5, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

**Credibility of sources.** Trust and credibility were discussed in regards to the lack of accurate information. Data suggested that information coming from government and industry was difficult to understand and believe because of a lack of trust. “Nobody was trusting any information because they kept saying like ‘BP’s doing this for us’ and ‘BP’s paying for this’ you know. It made everyone not trust them because they thought they were just buying them off” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

When probed further regarding other actions by these organizations that they believed were not transparent, a Regional Forum participant said “the government and organizations made it more difficult to get the information. They did not have a response when asked how cleanup was going to happen” (April 26, 2012). Several also questioned whether state and federal government and BP were forthcoming with information or with holding. “There’s not that transparency. That’s another thing is that information shouldn’t be withheld, the information about the well itself, and the oil that continues to be present” (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012).

### **Ineffective Communication Efforts**

The data showed a strong need for more communication, both internally and externally. Several pieces of data indicated that although communication efforts were

being done, it was not effective or geared toward the correct audience. “There was a lack of clear communication from government to concerned communities. Information did not filter down to local resources” (Field Notes from Regional Forum, April 26, 2012). Others argued that some organizations were not communicating information back to regulatory agencies. “We’re aware that the agencies and organizations are not necessarily funneling that information up the chain of command” (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012).

Lack of internal communication was a source of frustration for many organizations. “We were responders. We were support. We were backup. We were not in the loop a lot, in my opinion” (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Others indicated that the sheer amount of news media and information made it difficult to develop messages. “There was so much communication going out through so many channels that it was hard to distinguish yourself as – and listen to us because we’ve got this information or whatever” (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

In addition, external audiences needed information and were accessing internal networking systems in an effort to find information.

The counties have a web-based system where they post different things to request resources or assistance from the state. What we found is that people were monitoring that since it was publically accessible. Sometimes they were getting say the wrong impression based on some of the requests. (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012).

Ineffective communication caused many of the needs and problems that continue to linger in some communities. “Communication was one of our biggest weaknesses” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). The data also indicated that

those in the community understood that in order to overcome crises in the future that there is a need to improve communication channels, both internally and externally.

One finding that was particularly interesting is the inability of organizations to work together once they did come together. One Regional Forum participant described this as the inability to engage. “We engaged and we had opportunities to engage. The thing is, when we engaged, we didn’t have the next step. So that is where we failed”

(Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

As far as the cooperative nature of the stakeholders, many of them were not used to playing with each other like this, and so it took a lot of time to just spend time. [Some organizations] were so dominant. It was so hard for them to hear – to sit in the room with the [others] and hear them. It was just tough. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

Although some organizations expressed frustration in working together, others suggested that more needed to be done to encourage collaboration among organizations. “Everyone’s working at a silo and when we do finally sit down at the table, one silo met another silo and if somehow we can get all the information out” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Statements such as this suggest that the organizations understood the importance of coming together but failed to meet that next layer of working to develop key messages. “Creating consensus and a unified process was a painstaking process. There was no consistent message to the media” (Field Notes, April 26, 2012).

The lack of a consistent message and the magnitude of messages was also correlated with news media hype.

It’s just that these messages were so convoluted and messy, unclear and it wasn’t the fault of the media. Well, I suspect it could’ve been some of the fault of the media because they were - at first - they were really hyping okay, can’t you get out there and volunteer, volunteer, volunteer? Let’s save

our beaches. It hyped and it got everybody excited. (Interview 9, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

### **Hard to Reach Audiences**

Grunig (1992) described hard-to-reach audiences as those that require specialized communication efforts to reach. Hard-to-reach audiences are a real concern within rural communities as many are not able to receive key messages. With inconsistent messages already identified as barriers to communication, comments also showed that these barriers were in addition to the ongoing barrier of reaching those audiences that are indeed hard to reach. One Regional Forum participant stated that,

There are people who were not getting the information at all and then also trying to define those that are hard to reach with your message like folks that are already convinced or something you know what I mean like the physically hard to reach. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

It was noted that these hard-to-reach audiences receiving wrong information or difficult-to-understand information further complicated this barrier.

It was important to determine what information different groups in the community need. The challenge was we were going out telling people to go to this place for service and they did not have capacity to provide the service in our community so they could not get an appointment. Some people were being told that they needed to go to Tallahassee. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

“We have a tremendous illiteracy rate here. That is an issue. That becomes a communications thing as well. I mean we have to simplify stuff to go out” (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012).

### **Unique Audiences**

In addition to hard-to-reach audiences, community resource organizations also indicated that this disaster had several sections of the population looking for help, which

normally would not come to them for services. Therefore, CROs found themselves having to communicate with a group of people with which they were unfamiliar.

For a lot of people, this was the first time they [needed our services]. You were looking at middle class not. That was something they're not accustomed to. That's probably, in my mind, one of the big areas. It was probably the most difficult because we don't typically advertise. We had a new bunch of people who are middle class. They've never had to ask for help, and, truthfully, had no idea where to go. (Interview 8, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

They're independent people. They're not used to going and knocking on the door and saying, "Doctor, I'm depressed. I'm upset about the oil spill." They way to get to them is through their peers. We were really pushing for a peer counseling or peer outreach kind of a thing. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

### **Lack of Control over Information**

Many of the complaints associated with social media related to the overall lack of control. Data consistently showed a frustration of community members not being able to control the information was both frustrating and a hindrance in effectively communicating to their audiences. For example,

The outside control of the information and resources was a weakness. Something that was discussed here is that sometimes people have learned about the situation and what was happening not from the local residents and local news, but outside from national news and from people that were controlling the information and also the resources. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

The news cycle was just constantly on us. It was really hard to keep up and give the latest information. You know when we saw things that were wrong we tried to respond to those as quickly as we could either by calling the EOC and having them send out information or responding to individuals who contacted us. (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

Several organizations indicated that release information was not a guarantee of its correct interpretation. "It was all part of the rumor mills. Externally [communication], we would put a piece of information out there and two people later it's completely different

than what had [originally] gone out” (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012). Correcting these inaccuracies also took a great deal of time for organizations. “We spent a lot of our time redirecting and getting correct information out there [because] there was a lot of rumor and rumor mongering” (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

**Social media.** One Regional Forum participant gave an example in which their EOC was working to control the information that went out, but was unsuccessful in controlling social media.

Our EOC director made it very clear that what was being shared at the table was a mistake because some stuff was just speculation. OK we don't have these things confirmed so we were just thinking of these things as theoretical and as soon as the meeting was over people were posting it on Facebook and it was airing it out there immediately. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

### **Uniqueness of the Situation**

The Florida Gulf Coast counties are no strangers to natural disasters (NOAA, 2012). Hurricanes and severe storms are disasters for which these counties are prepared. Disaster plans required by the State of Florida are very detailed, tested, and implemented at the first alert. In addition, CROs within counties often come together in EOCs to implement plans and handle internal and external communications accordingly. However, the data indicated that this disaster was very different and prepared plans they had in place did not apply.

With a hurricane, there is a plan for recovery, leadership, steps, etc. It is all written out. This was different. There wasn't any established protocol in terms of how to respond to manmade disaster. Florida has operations and procedures for natural disasters. Everything was being made-up as you move along. Nobody had anything. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

I think that's the biggest different is that it went on for a very long time, and it wasn't as tangible an impact as a hurricane blew the house down. With this, I didn't have a house I could go put back together for this person. Yeah, we're all not as financially sound as were a few months ago. It was just different. Yes, it's a disaster but placing that title of disaster on this event is a little more difficult. (Interview 8, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

You know, emergency management has a plan for just about anything, chemicals, tornados, hurricanes, you name it, but there was no plan for this. There was no plan for a man-made waterborne disaster along the Gulf Coast. You know, we just hadn't foreseen it. If I was in the oil industry, I might have. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

This was so unpredictable that you didn't know if it was [going to] continue to get worse or back off or it was [going to] hit land. That was what was different. As unpredictable as hurricanes can be, their effects are just a matter – same kind of impact, it's just how widespread are they. It was a psychological impact more than a physical for most people (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

The unique circumstances associated with the responsible party incident made a lot of that [emergency management plans] incompatible with a centrally directed response. Complicated things in significant way, added to cost, delayed actions to protect both our coast and our environment, but it was what it was and all we could do was respond to the circumstances, the hand that we were dealt. (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Our organization is prepared for almost any disaster. What we were not prepared for was the reaction of other organizations. In this case, with the responsible party being BP, it was completely flipped over from what's traditional emergency management response and it was problematic. (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

Problems were further defined as “emergency management knew how to do this and they couldn't. The resources that we as people have developed over the years was impotent. The whole infrastructure was impotent. That's probably the number one frustration” (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012). Another said, “There's no instruction on what to do in the case of disaster on your beach” (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012).

Others also indicated the uniqueness of the situation in the calls received and the time it took to feel the effects from DWH oil spill in their community. “The spill was a unique disaster. It was long in coming and encouraged people to contact us that were looking for volunteer opportunities, not [that] were affected by it. It was a very different disaster” (Interview 9, personal communication, August 15, 2012). She said, “We had 1,700 calls in one weekend. We normally take in somewhere around 2,500 to 3,000 calls a month. You can see that was overwhelming. There was nothing to tell them because there was nothing they could do” (Interview 9, personal communication, August 15, 2012). Another interviewee shared a similar experience. “There was a lot of wasted energy and response of people who just needed something to do. They then felt powerless because they couldn’t [do anything]” (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012). CROs continued to express frustration over how to help stakeholders. “If you’re worried that your entire family is going to have cancer because you ate fish a week ago, good lord, what do I say to you” (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012)?

Other organizations spoke of the difference in the working relationship with state and federal government and how this made this a particularly difficult situation. Typically, “the state, the federal government would be aligning their approach to support what we were doing in the trenches, in the normal disaster” (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

### **Lack of Resources**

Many smaller nonprofit and non-governmental organizations struggle to meet the needs of their communities with very limited resources (Salamon, 2010). In times of disaster, the needs of the community tend to increase and CROs are asked to provide

additional services and/or resources. Community members noted in their discussions at the Regional Forum that many of their needs were not met because of the lack of resources. One participant said,

I think what you have to realize in a rural community is the word staff is a big word because we're very stretched on resources and its mostly volunteers of people who have multiple responsibilities combined into one. So, there's not a lot of staff. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

CROs were frustrated because of the lack of funding that is often accompanied for natural disasters. However, outside funding was not applicable to this situation.

They were told, you can't do it, it's not a declared disaster. This is [different] kind of disaster and if we go implementing, and all the funding that's required to implement all of these normal response processes, than they're not going to be paid for because this is the responsible entity. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

In addition to not meeting the needs because of lack of resources, several participants voiced that they were limited in their efforts regarding the DWH oil spill because of their responsibilities.

One barrier was our job, like your business, like a way to reach those people that are, I mean, you're not going to give up a day of fishing so you can search for information on you know what I mean getting away in the midst of everything. We are trying to keep a business going. (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012)

### **No Immediate Need**

In natural disasters, emergency and disaster plans are implemented immediately following (and often during) the disaster to meet the needs of the community. However, many organizations did not implement those plans for this disaster, as there was not an immediate need for the community. Often the needs of the community were not realized until months later.

This was not that kind of disaster. So we didn't activate [emergency] plan because it wasn't that kind of disaster. It wasn't where we had an immediate – the impact was not immediate on a lot of folks. It was over time, people lost their jobs, and the business deteriorated. Then they felt they had to come to us. (Interview 8, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

A disaster of that magnitude did not require any response. It was a slow burn, so there was no limitation or disaster plan. The oil didn't show up on the shore until June. Even then, all it was – it was an economic disaster. People just – tourists stopped coming. (Interview 5, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

### **Overcoming Barriers to Communication**

In response to barriers that were identified by the participants, further questioning revealed strategic problem solving efforts utilized by the organizations to overcome many of the barriers. As shown in Figure 4.2, the overall categories regarding communication tactics used by organizations to overcome barriers to effective communication include collaboration, crisis/issues management, and public relations. Each of these categories and sub-categories will be discussed.

#### **Collaboration**

Consistently, data showed elements of collaboration used by CROs to overcome barriers to effective communication. Working together to meet the goals of the organizations and the community was a common thread within the data. One interviewee said, “we were collaborating before the spill and will continue to collaborate” (Interview 8, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

Echoing that statement, one Regional Forum participant said, “The nonprofits united to help communities. We sat together as a community to look at addressing the challenges and the issues” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 20102). Strength in unity, including not only nonprofit organizations, but also nonprofit

organizations coupled with agencies, was used to describe strengths during the DWH oil spill (Field notes, April 2012).

Collaboration of different organizations including other agencies and government officials was discussed in regards to the immediate response to the DWH oil spill.

Well the most immediate response was as the contingency planning team that they assembled. That was about 30 people with elected officials and people from different industries and backgrounds to figure out what our most critical environment areas were to make sure we protected them. (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012).

[We] co-convened a group of the leaders of social services [in our area]. All of the major parts of the social service system that sort of hold the system up. We convened pretty soon after [the DWH oil spill]. We co-created strategies in all of those areas to deal with service issues and with communication. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

We started having meetings. Then we had the first meeting of what we called [emergency management team]. This was the first meeting that you would see under a traditional disaster recovery effort to say perhaps these partners – we need to coordinate how we're going to respond to this. (Interview 5, personal communication, August 15, 2012)

Within many of these groups that banded together for response and recovery, pre-determined roles for marketing/communication were defined. For instance, one document from a collaborative group stated that the role of the marketing and communications was to “develop and disseminate coordinated messaging in the media campaign that provides relevant information, alleviates fears and engenders a sense of control and resilience. Identify a trusted person to be the champion who carries the message” (Document 11, 2010, p. 1).

Of the organizations that came together for immediate response, many had not worked together in past, but their work in response to DWH oil spill was encouraging for future collaborations.

They didn't have the need to do collaborative or cooperative ventures except when there was a particular thing going on. We all knew each other and so we'd pull something together to respond to an RFP or such, but there was not kind of the – almost like default collaborative process. Now, I think there's a lot more of that potential to be actuated in the event if something similar occurred. There's an improved relationship between and among all of those so I think we could pull things together and collaboratively respond much better than we did at that time with the same one issue that we'd have to deal with. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Several organizations relied on the collaborations with their community partners to communicate about the services they provided to the community.

It's about how we communicate internally. It is more about internal than it is external because, again, we are doing [service]. That's the big part of that. We are going to communicate with the EOC. We communicated locally with our EOC and kept up that way. We kept the community partners informed. (Interview 8, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

Probably most importantly, directly down to the impacted individual, whether they were working in the hospitality industry as a maid, or in restaurants, but get through those organizations to those that truly were on the front lines. We were able to-because of our role [with emergency collaboration]. (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

“We worked with individual agencies that had the capability of doing things to help do those things. Peer support, outreach to underserved population, outreach to diverse populations, all of that was part of [our strategy]” (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012). “That's how we often times distribute information is through our partner organizations and volunteers” (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012). Documents provided by the organizations supported this. A great deal of planning went into determining venues for distributing fact sheets and getting information out to the stakeholders once the oil well was capped (Document 12, 2010).

Community leaders spoke of reaching out and collaborating personally with other organizations. “I am in the community almost every day at some kind of meeting and

updating them not only on what the topic is but what's going on at our [organization]. So they know" (Interview 8, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

Collaboration beyond county lines was also discussed as a great tool for disseminating information and learning from other areas. "We have [partners] in seven counties and the most remarkable thing is that they are now supporting each other. There's movement toward kind of a regional response capability" (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

### **Information Sharing**

In addition to collaborating to meet the needs of the community and communicating, CROs utilized disaster management software to understand what each organization was doing, to share resources and information. Each CRO in the region and across counties was encouraged to sign up. This software "allows for regular updates and communication to users with an internal message board, communication forums and a community calendar" (Document 13, 2010, p. 1). It also provided reports, resources, and mapping technology. One organization stated of the system, "It was frankly never designed for this kind of instance, but it provided a vehicle for sharing of information" (Interview 4, personal communication, August, 17, 2012). This software "allows for regular updates and communication to users" (Document 13, 2010, p. 1).

Others looked to meetings in other areas and with completely different organizations or agencies as an opportunity to share information. "I went to every single meeting. I would go to meetings and show up and make sure that they get the information" (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012).

## Utilization of Existing Networks

In addition to forming new partnerships, data showed that existing networks were utilized.

There were a group of us that met regularly to establish just to keep our finger on the pulse. Those were the mental health – those associated with mental health, those associated with the work force, anything that kind of was peripheral to this, the health department, etc. We all met on a regular basis just to keep our finger on the pulse of things. (Interview 9, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

This was also true for groups that had come together to work on natural disasters in the area.

Our EOC is very proactive in doing tabletop exercises and so the whole emergency support function people know each other, they've worked together on a number of drills. We also had fairly regular storm events so we're comfortable working with each other and we know each other. (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

In addition, one Regional Forum participant discussed the role of networks in meeting the needs of the community: "We improved our ties with the Division of Emergency Management and the Coast Guard. We developed new partnerships at the state and federal levels and also with universities and different organizations" (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

Working together and establishing trust with organizations was mentioned as key in meeting goals for the recovery following the DWH oil spill. In addition, improved relationships and strengthening ties has benefited many of the organizations as interview 1 said,

How our office responded during the oil spill went a long ways in building that repertoire and trust with the EOC. Because I think [they] were a little fearful I'd just be independent, "go you're too slow", but having been through the training and stuff I understood the proper chain of command. Yeah, and then especially when they turned around and started asking me

to provide them with information, I said, “Okay, that’s what we’re here for.” (August 14, 2012)

Many discussed that networks had already been established because of work on previous disasters. These networks made the process of obtaining and sharing information much easier. “Communication [on a local level], including the grassroots individuals in the community as well as the organizations in the community, like local churches was good because everyone was out there working day to day” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

However, some argued that although some networks already existed, they often did not include smaller organizations within a larger community. “That’s probably our biggest challenge, is a communications network that is effective to all sub-committees within our larger community” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

### **Crisis/Issues Management**

The first step for many of the organizations was to gather information from other areas and other organizations that had been through similar disasters. Their hope was to learn from the experience and to gain insight on next steps.

Again, a lot of this was just being an instrument of communication, but I think it’s part of the reason why our community was a best practice. We were able to learn from [other disasters] best practice examples to bring to our community and leverage for the response and recovery from the oil spill. (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

There wasn’t anything in [our research] about how to deal in an oil spill. It was never a consideration, you know. We started calling people in Alaska to try and figure out what to do because there was – and eventually Texas and things like that. We would call a wildlife specialist. It just wasn’t an area that we had any experience in. (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

“[Large statewide organization] had shared with us some best practice examples from oil spills in California, and in other areas of the country” (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012). Organizations also sought the counsel of leading researchers in disaster management for assistance in response and recovery to the DWH oil spill.

[The researcher] came over to our community and spoke [at a regional meeting] in June of 2010, very shortly after the DWH oil spill impacted our community. Our leadership and our partners were able to hear firsthand from probably, well, among the most noted researchers of oil spills and technological disasters firsthand for psychological, social impacts of a technological disaster like an oil spill. (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

Although many spoke that emergency plans that they had in place did not apply to the DWH oil spill, others stated that they were able to apply some of their plans to the situation.

Overall, we were well prepared in that we’d already gone through all the emergency management training. We were already [involved] with the EOC folks. We already had specified roles, we were immediately asked to be a member of the contingency planning team. They knew we had some expertise. They tapped into our expertise. But yeah, this was a little different. All those things are practice but we’ve never practiced for an oil spill. (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

When there’s a hurricane, I’m stationed there to take citizen calls. That was my ordinance the first few days too. So we had a full staff of people ready to go and take calls and get information to them. They tried to get as much as they could available on short notice, but still coming together as it happened. (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012)

Others commented that they felt their efforts after the DWH oil spill was to make it up as they went along and would be a road map for future similar disasters.

The number one gap at the time was [absence] of such a plan [for this type of disaster] and that’s why we brought all the stakeholders together because there’s so many pieces to a plan, and emergency management was a big part of that. That’s the number one thing that we didn’t have and that we put effort into creating. If we were to – if it was to happen again, we

have the expertise of not knowing, of not having a plan, and it would be much easier to use all of these various resource and constituencies that we've created and brought together into consortia to make it work today. At least, I like to think that we would. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

We did things that we knew to do to minimize losses. Then as the event proceeded, then we started taking a look at actions that we could take to respond to and recover from the impacts that were in fact occurring in our community, or had occurred by those points. (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

Several references to EOCs' public information officer indicated that organizations had crisis communication plans and were trying to follow them to the best of their ability.

Yeah, that's all part of the emergency support function. We have a public information officer, a PIO, and so part of the I'll say emergency management response training is we all know that we say nothing, everything goes through our public information officer. If we have say press or media asking we direct them to our PIO, we might be providing the PIO with the information that's going out. (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012)

"We collaborated with the public information officer in [specific] County. We communicated pretty broadly to the public, including our own partner organizations" (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Other communication steps included sending out press releases, holding teleconferences and keeping in contact with other organizations (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

As part of an effort to communicate with their stakeholders, several organizations set up hotlines to verify and take in new information. "[Verifying information] became part of the issue that's just keeping the reliable information out there, encouraging people to call the hotline and don't announce. I mean wait for verification" (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012). Others took several steps to insure that stakeholders could reach them and provide feedback.

We were trying to be proactive on our side, and we got some pictures of some of the inland areas that people would take. We had an e-mail where people could report stuff. We had a webpage developed strictly for oil issues, so that people could go right there and get the latest and greatest on everything we knew. We did town hall meetings and forums. We did our best to keep the citizens informed. I think we did a pretty darn good job. The problem is we couldn't tell them much because we didn't know much. (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

"We really, really take communication seriously, very seriously. We never want to be accused of not communicating or not getting the message out" (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

**Message development.** Developing messages that resonate with their publics was a strategic effort that several organizations utilized to overcome barriers.

We developed messages as simple as if you've got sticky feet, clean your feet. We had a lot of messaging about that, a lot of information we displayed at the beach cleanup stations. [Local radio stations] also assisted in helping just to provide some background in information. I know we got some message out through [email delivery system]. (Interview 4, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

In order to overcome the barrier to not having accurate information to share with their stakeholders, some organizations worked independently to research information and develop messages.

We did the research; we've disseminated the information. We were the only organization, and even within the nonprofits and environmental organizations that was posting all of our data. At any rate, one thing that really set our organization apart was the transparency, and every piece of data is there so other researchers, if they need it, they could pull the actual files. (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012)

Others spoke about developing messages in the future. "We had to talk about making the message simpler so that everybody can understand the message and also making it relative" (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Other messaging concerns focused on communicating accurate information. "Translating the

research into practice as in putting it in a context ‘what does this mean’. You know, in a way people are going to use it” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Others spoke on accurate messages. “To improve how accurate the information we are communicating is. It’s not just a matter of improving the communication channels and the levels of trust, but also that information we are communicating is clear and relevant” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

## **Public Relations**

Many of the organizations spoke of public relations efforts they used to communicate with their stakeholders and overcome communication barriers. Although news media was considered a very large barrier for many, several of the organizations spoke about their strong relationships with local news media as strength in helping to reach their stakeholders. “I think the [local media] did a reasonable job. Especially our local newspaper, I mean they didn’t want to give anyone more anxiety than they already had. They would print what they were given from the PIO” (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012).

The media here, they tend to be really cooperative. The local [newspaper] were all over it. I mean I’m on a personal relationship with that guy. The radio stations were likewise very cooperative. I’ve had an ongoing relationship with local [NPR station] for a long time. I’ve done work with and for them. All of the major media we already were doing different kinds of collaborative projects and things together so it was not hard to get them to agree to participate. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

In regards to media relations, discussion of media training and learning how to work more effectively with the news media was a common solution to overcoming barriers. “We need to try to get ahead of the news. To try to get ahead of what’s being reported by them” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Other

thoughts included, “I think it’s more than just the scientist [learning to work with the media], but also the organizations need to have people and staff who work on social media websites and working with the TV stations and newspapers” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

In addition, existing communication efforts were increased after the DWH oil spill or were improved to focus more on the impacts of the DWH oil spill.

We have an electronic newsletter and we typically publish it quarterly. [It was suggested] that we put together a newsletter related to the oil spill. That we did and everybody wrote about something specific. That was actually one of the best outreach things we did. That went all the way up to – it went all over. It was very well received. We got a lot of good feedback from that. (interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012)

The newsletters covered a variety of different topics including “a basic introduction to oil spills, cleanup and response methods, seafood safety, human stress and environmental impacts” (Document 1, 2010, p. 1). Other issues focused on recovery efforts, upcoming meeting regarding recovery, and ways that the public could become involved (Document 2, 2010). The newsletters reached over “23,000 clientele, in addition to many individual articles that were picked up by local newspapers” (Document 3, 2010, p. 1).

Other participants focused on sharing information through the Web. “We set up a website and our page on our website, and as our results came in we posted them” (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012).

As shown, some organizations added to their current communication efforts during this time; however, several indicated that a lot of their communication with stakeholders was done one-on-one over the phone. “Just being within the structure and responding

to general questions about it. I was to talking to more and more people at [after the DWH oil spill],” (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

### **Two-Way Symmetrical Communication**

Utilizing two tactics to overcome barriers, several organizations came together and utilized an existing volunteer program to reach out to the community. The volunteers were trained and then were sent out into the community to help clean up the beaches, provide information. and essentially just talk to community members. This group also passed out surveys to gauge the community and their needs for these organizations.

We did pull in. We wound up with 22 [volunteers] in the community. They did things like surveys out in the community, out at the [worksite] locations, out at play areas, beaches and so forth to determine how people were affected, and what kinds of issues they were experiencing, and did they want assistance. [They were there to] give them our number, that kind of thing. They collected quite a bit of data. (Interview 9, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

We had these teams that came in and they would overlap so that they could pass on their learning. They're short term, they're like four to six weeks, and there's 10-12 of them. They're talented, their energetic and they were very helpful in a number of ways. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

We developed a program where we put some information packets together and had volunteers out on the beach giving information to tourists. It was – we tried to cover the gammut. It wasn't oil only. It was, what kind of shell is this? What kind of fish are out here? (Interview 9, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

Programs such as these “helped beach visitors and residents get answers to questions about what they are seeing on the beach and in the water” (Document 3, 2010, p. 1).

In improving communication with their audiences, some CROs tried to understand what their communities were going through. “Listening is the first step to communication. If you have a way to get to the people and you build community, you'll

have a lot better communication” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Other organizations went a step further and developed informal research surveys that assessed the needs and psychological effects of their stakeholders. “It wasn’t random sampling, but it allowed people to voice their fears and their thoughts and what not and a lot of people were a little irritated about information” (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012). From this research they gathered that “education on how to cope might need to be added to the webpage and community meetings” (Document 4, 2010, p. 1).

Using the information gathered from their independent research, organizations spoke of developing programs that allowed their stakeholders to provide them with feedback and information. They were able to tailor their communication efforts based on the feedback they received.

We created a system with a phone that they could take a picture and plug in a message and it would send it back to us and that could be uploaded into our [geographical tracking system], so we could track where things were happening and have photographic backup of what was being seen. (Interview 7, personal communication, August 1, 2012).

“We also knew what the citizens want. That’s one thing we did have. We had good communications with citizens. They were sending in their ideas, their requests. That’s kinda what we could do at the local level” (Interview 7, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

CROs that had a member base of smaller organizations, spoke of the importance of being out in the community and talking to members. “The important thing here is just to get out and talk to folks, visit them. They will be so appreciative that someone has come to visit with them and just talk to them” (Interview 1, personal communication, August 14, 2012). Some developed peer-to-peer programs to reach unique audiences.

It's all peer to peer. This is not your, this is not a population that's used to having to ask for help. The nature of an environmental damage to the place you love like this tends to isolate people, and so you've got to meet them in a different way. To reach people and get them the message about they need to be doing, with the resources available to them, etc. [It is more] of an outreach thing than a traditional media thing. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012)

### **Working in the Community**

Several of the organizations took initiative and quickly developed programs that put people in their target publics into action. As studying barriers showed, community members felt a great need to do something. They were looking to CROs to fulfill this need.

I don't want to call it busy work, but as a way of saying to them, "this is something you can do, and it's not going to put you in danger." They didn't have to wear special gear or anything. They can just clean up the beach. (Interview 9, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

Some organizations were out in the community personally distributing information and talking with people on the beach.

I worked out some cards with the [local agency] website and phone numbers, handed them out, who they needed to call to get the information. Had a smiley face on it, non-threatening, but I developed my own system of what I could do [about informing the public]. (Interview 6, personal communication, August 16, 2012)

Organizations also reached out to the community through community events and fairs. This allowed them to talk one-on-one with community and provide them with information regarding their services.

We provided some brochures. We go to a lot of health fairs. We have a guy that goes to any kind of community thing that's going on whether it is a health fair or a community in the suburb back-to-school kind of fair, any of that. He is at all of those events. (Interview 8, personal communication, August 15, 2012).

One organization hosted a forum regarding the DWH oil spill. The forum consisted of both scientific and health experts and the public was invited.

We had about 100 people in the audience, radio there. We had lots of good media. It was a good program. We had some really good people in the panel who gave legitimate answers, researchers. We had health department staff. (Interview 3, personal communication, August 20, 2012).

In talking through some of the lessons learned from the DWH oil spill and perhaps what some organizations might have done differently, several discussed more community-based events. At these events they could provide information to their publics. For instance, one Regional Forum participant suggested, “Festivals would also be a great opportunity to get information to the public about the safety of seafood” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012). Others agreed:

If I was to do it again today, I think we would do much more community events, neighborhood activities than public media per say. I’d get a star, I’d get a football player or some kind of star and I’d have them go visit a neighborhood with the right information. I’d do it differently today. I don’t think I would rely as much on the mass media and more on neighborhood and smaller community outreach. (Interview 2, personal communication, August 17, 2012).

A mini-symposium was also suggested as a way to reach out to the public. It was discussed that events such as a mini-symposium would educate certain members of the public who would then reach out to others. “Word of mouth and grassroots education is a lot more powerful than even technology” (Regional Forum, personal communication, April 26, 2012).

### **Summary**

Research questions at the beginning of this study were developed to determine how CROs defined the barriers to communication they experienced in communicating with their target publics during the DWH oil spill. In addition, research was focused to

learn the communication tactics practices by the CROs to overcome these barriers. In identifying the major barriers to communication, five major categories emerged including media, lack of accurate information, ineffective communication efforts, lack of control over information, and uniqueness of the situation. In identifying the major communication efforts to overcome barriers, collaboration, crisis and issues management, and public relations emerged from the data.

### **Barriers to Communication**

CROs defined news media as a barrier, because of the amount and often reporting of inaccurate information. Participants also noted that news media often made the situation much worse than reality. Under news media, the subcategory national versus local news media coverage emerged. This category included comments from participants regarding the difference in reports from national news media versus local news media.

Lack of accurate information was a large frustration for CROs. This category encompassed the lack of information for CROs to communicate to their audiences. In addition, the subcategory credibility of sources emerged from this main category. In line with the main category, this subcategory referenced that several organizations that were putting out information were not credible and therefore, the information was discredited.

Ineffective communication efforts emerged as the third main category. CROs commented that internal and external communication was poor and that information was not being shared among different organizations. In addition, the subcategories hard to reach audiences and unique audiences accounted for the difficulties CROs had with reaching certain segments of their publics.

The major category “lack of control over information” included CROs’ frustrations with the multitude of information that was disseminated and their publics’ frustration with having to sift through all the messages. They also specifically discussed the problems with controlling information shared with social media.

The last category that emerged from the barriers to communication was the uniqueness of the situation. Although CROs in this area were very familiar with natural disasters in their area, they were unable to apply many of their tried-and-true efforts to this situation. Lack of resources and no immediate need were subcategories under uniqueness. Participants explained that resources that were typically available during natural disasters were not available during the DWH oil spill. In addition, the urgency of natural disasters was not a factor in this disaster. Therefore, CROs felt their hands were tied until oil reached their coast.

### **Overcoming Barriers Categories**

In looking at RQ2 regarding the communication efforts and tactics utilized by CROs in order to overcome barriers to communication, major barriers identified were collaboration, crisis and issues management, and public relations.

Collaboration refers to the steps taken by CROs to come together to address the needs of their community. This includes combining services, communication channels, and resources. Subcategories under collaboration included information sharing and utilization of existing networks. The groups developed innovative ways to share information among organizations. This system was fast and was able to keep everyone informed. In addition, CROs turned immediately to already-established partnerships, but were quick to partner with new organizations in order to better serve their communities.

The crisis and issues management category included efforts practices by CROs that were part of their crisis communication plans for natural disasters. This category also referred to steps utilized by CROs that were in line with crisis management and issues management literature. A subcategory within this category was message development which included the time and thought that CROs invested into crafting exact messages for their publics.

The last category identified was public relations efforts. Included in this category are events, and meetings. utilized by CROs to communicate. Subcategories in this area included two-way symmetrical communications and working in the community. Included within these categories were the grassroots efforts and opportunities CROs used in order to best communicate their messages.

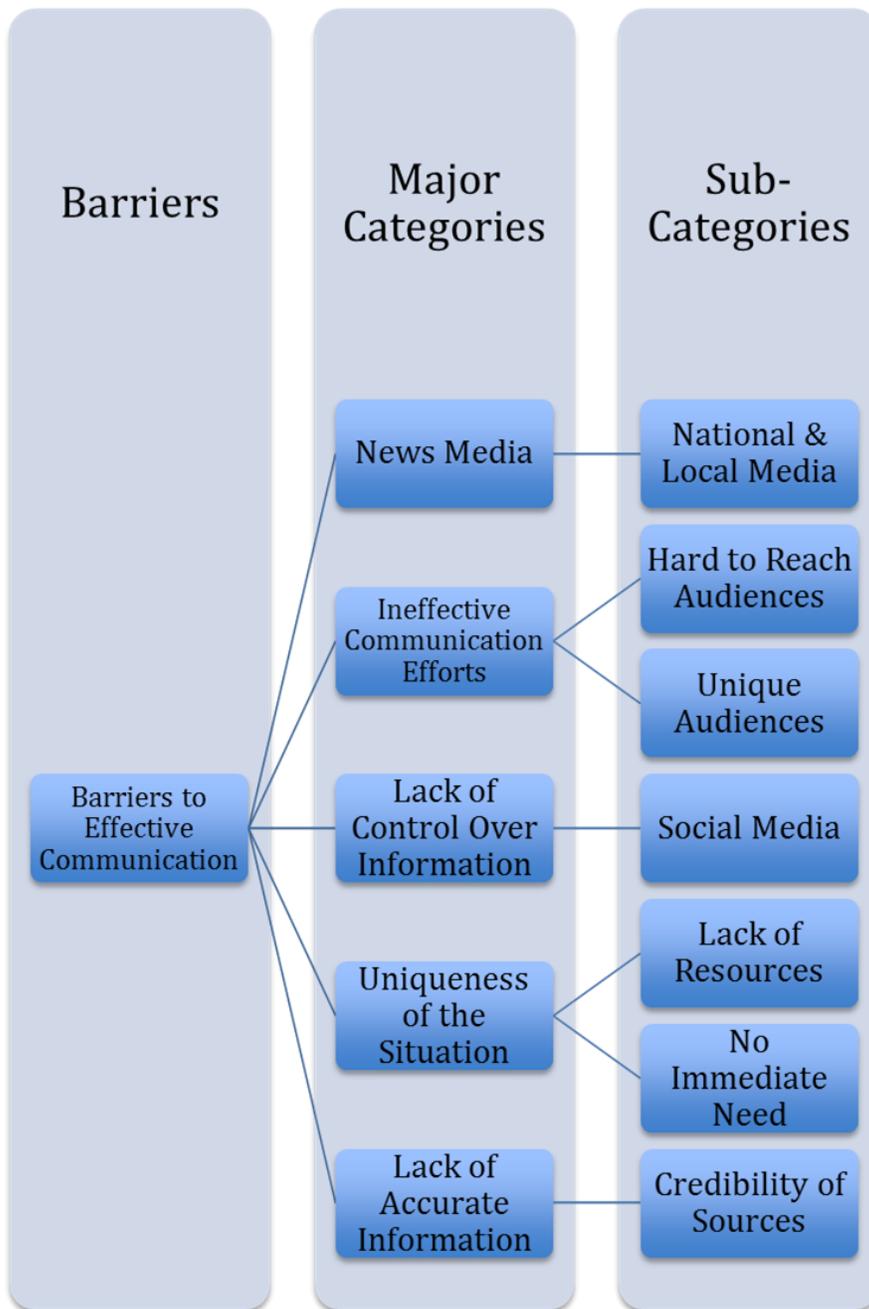


Figure 4-1. Major categories and subcategories for barriers to effective communication

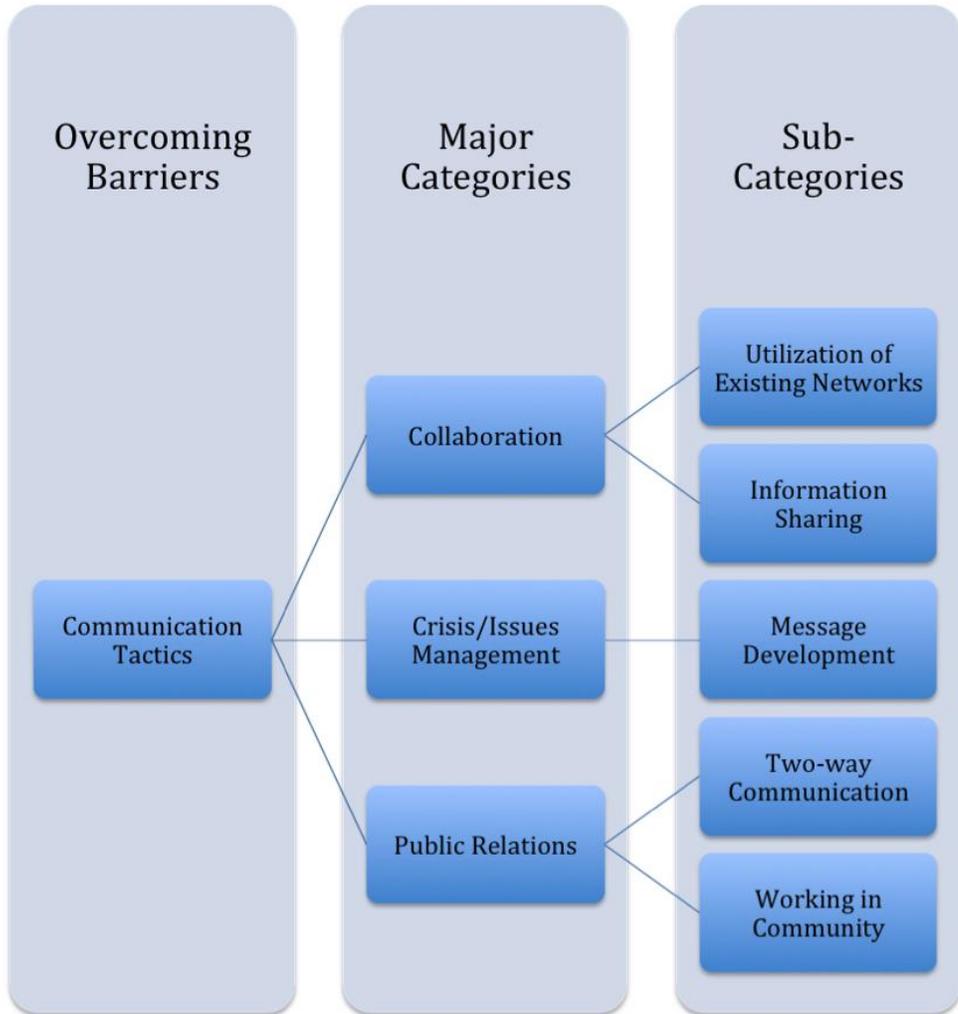


Figure 4-2. Major categories and subcategories for communication tactics used to overcome barriers

## CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the barriers to effective communication encountered by community resource organizations in the Florida Panhandle during the DWH oil spill. In addition, this study was interested in learning the tactics taken by the organizations to overcome these barriers to communicate to the communities they serve. Therefore, the research questions were

- **RQ1:** How would community resource organizations describe the barriers to effective communication that they encountered during and after the DWH oil spill?
- **RQ2:** How did CROs overcome communication barriers in order to communicate with their audiences effectively?

### **Overview**

The results of this study can provide insight into crisis and issues management, the role CROs play in crisis situations, and how CROs communicate with their target publics. The study aimed to interpret the results of this study and apply them to future research in these areas.

### **Barriers to Effective Communication**

Barriers to effective communication are present every day. Whether they come in the form of noise as indicated in the Shannon-Weaver model (1949), not having enough information, or a misinterpretation of the message by the receiver, barriers can happen at all levels of communication. In fact, overcoming barriers often becomes a major challenge for communicators. This could be especially true with CROs, which already operate on limited resources, including time and funding.

This study revealed that CROs identified five major barriers to effective communication during the DWH oil spill. The categories that emerged were news

media, ineffective communication efforts, lack of control over information, lack of accurate information, and the uniqueness of the situation.

As previously indicated, DWH oil spill remained a top story in the local and national news media for over 10 weeks. CROs were working to develop messages for news media while at the same time attempting to monitor the information that was out there. Their frustrations with working with the news media supported elements of crisis management and crisis theory. As indicated in crisis management and crisis theory, news media can impede a communication process because of the sheer amount of information or through reporting inaccurate information. Therefore developing a plan to effectively work with news media is a key element of crisis management and crisis theory.

Because of the complexity and impact of the DWH oil spill, many CROs found that they had to communicate with publics that they were not familiar. As the DWH oil spill affected the communities in many different ways including economically, environmentally, and psychologically, members of the community, who did not typically need services, were seeking services from local CROs. CROs found that they had to develop messages and reach publics in which they were unfamiliar.

Social media and new media provided opportunities for anyone to share information regarding the DWH oil spill. Therefore the effort by CROs to control information or refute false claims was close to impossible. CROs discussed their frustrations with the amount of false information that was made available to the public. Efforts were made to make corrections and verify correct messages, but because of the nature of social and new media, they were not able to monitor all information.

As discussed in Chapter 2, barriers to communication can come from the environment and outside of the actual organizations (Robbins, 1987; Grunig, 1992). Robbins (1987) defined that these external forces can affect the organization leaving it at a loss of how to effectively respond. As the DWH oil spill was such a unique situation to this area, CROs were often struggling to determine how best to manage. As previously mentioned, many tried to adapt plans from natural disasters but found that this situation was indeed, just different. They expressed frustrations in their inability to manage the DWH oil spill the same way natural disasters had been managed in the past. Evidence of the uniqueness of the DWH oil spill was discussed beyond the difference of this disaster than natural disasters. Data indicated that the slowness of the situation was unique. For instance, many CROs were familiar with the immediate needs following a natural disaster. However, with the DWH oil spill, there was no immediate need within the community. Community members were forced to endure a very stressful waiting period to see if oil would actually come to the coast.

In addition, participants discussed the uniqueness of the situation in terms of not having access to information. Kapucu (2006) discussed that “if information does not flow properly, it is hard to envision successful crisis and disaster management” (p. 216 -217). Lack of information was stated many times as one of the largest frustrations from the DWH oil spill. As natural disasters had a pre-determined communication flow in impacted communities, the DWH oil spill did not fit the model and therefore, receiving information proved very difficult and frustrating for CROs.

Further, the uniqueness of the situation and the failure to follow pre-determined emergency communication channels caused CROs to struggle to obtain information to

communicate to their stakeholders. As the DWH oil spill was a responsible party disaster, access to factual information was difficult. CROs expressed difficulty in determining if a source of information was trustworthy or not. In addition, in discussing information with stakeholders, many CROs discussed that stakeholders did not trust information coming from government and responsible parties in the disaster. Therefore, stakeholders were seeking out their own information, which was often wrong.

In examining the major barriers to effective communication, outside environmental forces are at the core of several. The influence of outside environment is the cornerstone of an open system as indicated in systems theory (Witmer, 2006). Dozier and Grunig (1992) discussed that open system provides a means for an organization to collect and disseminate information to their stakeholders. Results of this study found evidence of systems theory in two ways. To begin, several CROs conducted informal research of their communities to determine their needs and the psychological effects of the spill. Therefore, they were collecting data from their external data in order to craft messages that resonated with their stakeholders. Secondly, organizations reacted to the DWH oil spill and the impact it was having on their community by producing programs, services, and communication that directly addressed these impacts. Essentially, CROs were relying on the open system to provide them with information they needed to fill the needs of the communities they serve.

### **Overcoming Barriers**

The CROs involved in this study developed several communication efforts to overcome barriers. Collaboration and public relations tactics were perhaps the two most significant categories in the data. Collaborative efforts of CROs are in line with Kapucu's (2006) discussion of collaboration efforts during crisis situations. Many of these groups

collaborated because of their past experience and trust in one another. However, some had never collaborated before, but came together because of the uniqueness of the situation. Several organizations suggested that this new collaboration was a positive step for working together in the future.

Gajda (2004) discussed that organizations often collaborated to combine resources. The collaborative groups formed during DWH oil spill worked together to fulfill needs within the community and partnered for communication purposes. In fact, several CROs only communicated through partner organizations to disseminate messages out to the communities. They also utilized these channels to correct inaccurate information and to send out correct messages.

Similar to the collaborative efforts practiced by these organizations, CROs developed programs that targeted two-way symmetrical communication. Grunig (1992) explained that two-way symmetrical communication strives to understand and communicate to publics. CROs understood the importance of working in the community and communicating messages face to face. Therefore, they empowered volunteers to talk with tourists and residents on the beaches, and they provided public forums, set-up booths at local fairs and festivals, and developed outreach materials. CROs made it a priority to be out in the communities they serve. Along the same lines, they worked to understand and listen to their stakeholders and learn of their needs and concerns. Developing two-way communication efforts allowed for them to determine the inaccurate messages and to provide accurate information face-to-face. This tactic was used to overcome several barriers including unable to control information and the amount of inaccurate information.

Two interesting things about the results of this study were the crisis and issues management tactics utilized by CROs and the independent research done. As previously mentioned, one of the largest barriers for organizations was the uniqueness of the situation. When asked if they were able to use pre-determined crisis communication and emergency plans, many were quick to say no. Others explained that they were able to use some, but not all of the plans. However, in discussing communication techniques used by these organizations during the DWH oil spill, many of them referred to tactics such as working with public information officers, sending out press releases, providing ways to obtain feedback from audiences, and town hall meetings.

Steps in crisis management and issues management were apparent throughout the results. Each of the CROs did manage the issue using at least one of the steps from Jaques' (2007) model. In addition, the communication efforts used by the CROs were very much in line with the Ulmer et al. (2011) steps to effective communication during a crisis. Specific steps utilized included develop partnerships, listen to stakeholders, and strengthen relationships with stakeholders.

The data also indicated that CROs performed independent research in order to learn of the needs of their community. Upon learning of the spill, many organizations researched other areas such as California and areas impacted by the Exxon *Valdez* spill and other organizations that had been through similar disasters. From these organizations, they learned what to expect, as well as best management practices. In addition, several organizations did independent surveys of their communities to determine needs and psychological effects. Lastly, a few organizations, frustrated by

the lack of accurate information to communicate to their stakeholders, began conducting in-depth research such as samples from the beach, testing on tar balls, water, and sand.

### **Key Findings**

Results from my study revealed seven key findings. The first and second findings were the major categories determined through data analysis. Barriers to communication encountered by CROs were: news media, ineffective communication efforts, lack of control, uniqueness of the situation, and lack of information. CROs overcame these barriers to communication through collaboration, crisis and issues management, and public relations.

The third finding showed that even though not directly impacted by the DWH oil spill, CROs were practicing crisis and issues management tactics. They implemented these tactics to keep the community informed of services provided and where the community could go for help. In addition, CROs were disseminating information regarding the DWH oil spill in an effort to fill gaps in community members' need for more information.

The fourth key finding was the role of CROs becomes accelerated and in more demand during a crisis situation. Even before oil was identified on the shore, CROs identified their role as a resource to the community. They understood and embraced that services would have to increase, new programs would need to be developed, and that communication was crucial. Overcoming barriers to communication in order to reach their stakeholders was paramount for the mission of CROs.

The fifth key finding focused on the role of CROs during the DWH oil spill. CROs were sought out by community members for information and services during the DWH

oil spill. In an effort to meet the needs of the community, CROs worked diligently to develop a communication relationship with their stakeholders. Because of this relationship, they participated in two-way communication with them and therefore, had an understanding of the needs within the community. Having this information made them a valuable resource during the DWH oil spill. However, as indicated in the barriers to communication, CROs were not utilized as a resource or as a means in which to communicate information with impacted communities. CROs discussed the lack of information available to them and the lack of communication from relevant parties.

In addition, CROs could have been utilized as a resource for disseminating accurate information and providing insight into the needs of the communities. CROs were trying (and were called upon) to fill in the communication gaps for their communities and stakeholders, but were not receiving information from relevant parties within the crisis.

The sixth finding indicates that based upon the results of my study, Jaques (2007) combined non-linear model is reflective of several of the tactics practiced by CROs not directly impacted by DWH oil spill. Therefore, this model may be an effective model for studying crisis communication efforts of organizations not directly involved in a crisis.

The final key finding indicates that because of the crucial role played by CROs during the DWH oil spill, the work of CROs should be incorporated into crisis and issue management models. By including the work of CROs, crisis communication best practices could utilize this resource as a tactic to effectively communicate with an impacted community. Crisis communication models and crisis plans should include collaborations and partnerships with CROs during a crisis.

## **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

Results from this case study provide insight into the role that CROs play in crisis situations. Understanding this role not only impacts CROs in developing strategic communication, but also for-profit companies. Results also provide a platform in which to branch out the study of the crisis and issues management. This includes looking more closely at technology, practitioners, and collaboration.

### **CROs**

As previously identified in Chapter One, CROs are identified as those organizations that offer a service that fulfill a community need. Using this definition, understanding the importance of CROs during a crisis situation is crucial. As shown with the results of this study, CROs recognize their heightened role during a crisis. However, meeting the expectations and demands of the CROs may be a bit overwhelming, especially when operating on limited resources.

The results of this study indicated three major categories utilized to effectively communicate with their stakeholders: collaboration, crisis and issues management, and public relations. The tactics used by CROs to overcome communication barriers ultimately led to the effective communication during the DWH oil spill. Using the major categories and sub-categories that were developed based upon the data for overcoming barriers to communication, a model was developed for CROs during a crisis. Figure 5-1 shows the CROs Issue and Crisis Management Model for Effective Communication. Categories that were uncovered while analyzing the data have been used to develop best practices for CROs during a crisis. The arrows indicate that these practices are often used in combination with one another and/or can lead to one another. For instance, collaborating could potentially lead to development of crisis and issues

management tactics as the addition of a resource partner may allow the CRO to develop a more comprehensive crisis/issue management plan. In addition, public relation efforts could be an integral part of a crisis and issue management plan.

The major practices include collaborative efforts, crisis and issues management efforts, and public relations efforts. As shown with this research, these efforts are essential for any CRO during a crisis situation. However, they can also be greatly beneficial for day-to-day business. Once these practices are established before a crisis, the greater the capacity for effectiveness.

In order to collaborate and partner with other organizations, CROs should identify existing networks with other organizations through associations, previous programs, committees, and task forces. Consideration should be given to expanding the breadth of these established networks to identifying additional ways they could partner for the benefit of the community. If CROs are not currently involved in networks or partnership with other organizations, strong consideration should be given to doing so as it provides CROs with additional resources and information. Lastly, coming together prior to a crisis makes CROs a greater force when a crisis does hit.

Developing a crisis and issue management plan that includes a crisis communication component should be an essential element of any CROs' standard of procedures manual. Plans should be comprehensive and tailored for many different types of potential crisis/disaster situations. Plans should be detailed and take into account the stakeholders, their potential needs during a crisis and a way for them to contact the CRO and provide feedback. CROs should look to similar organizations (and

partnering organizations) for best management practices when managing crisis. CROs could learn from other organizations and apply strategies to a plan that fits the CRO.

Public relations efforts during a crisis can also be implemented into a crisis and issues management plan. However, as with previously mentioned efforts, if pre-emptive steps are in place prior to a crisis, it allows for the CRO to be more effective in their communication efforts. As the news media was identified as a barrier to effective communication for CROs, special consideration should be placed on developing a relationship with the news media and working with them to establish plans for receiving and disseminating information. Many of the CROs indicated that there was a strong relationship with the local news media. However, there was not a mention of a relationship with national news media. Although it is impossible to develop a relationship with all major news outlets, CROs should consider researching their regional directors and contacts at the Associated Press and other major news media stations, newspapers, radio, and television. Simply letting those individuals know about the CRO and the work they do may assist in developing an established relationship later.

In addition to developing relationships with the news media, CROs should implement grassroots tactics into their crisis communication plans as a way to incorporate two-way symmetrical communication. This allows for the CRO to listen to its stakeholders, while also having the CRO out in the community talking with people and assisting with clean-up and recovery.

Given that one of the largest barriers to communication identified by CROs was the lack of accurate information, CROs should consider establishing a strategic program or protocol that would assure them accurate information to communicate to their

stakeholders during a crisis. Such a strategic program or protocol may include a direct link with other businesses or organizations (such as a web-based information sharing tool) or the link may be established through a liaison, such as an association or umbrella organization. In addition, umbrella organizations may service as a convenient vehicle as receiving accurate and reliable information from a reputable source and pushing this information back out to its organizations.

### **Crisis and Issues Management**

As indicated in the significance of the study, much of the literature on crisis and issue management is focused on the organizations at the center of the crisis. However, results of this study indicated that steps of crisis and issues management were taken by CROs that were not directly involved in the cause of the crisis, but were strictly trying to manage the impact the crisis had on the community. It was clear that the stakeholder and community members were coming to CROs for assistance and information. Therefore, crisis and issues management plans of all organizations should develop a protocol to reach out to CROs during a crisis situation. These CROs should be considered a stakeholder, if they have not already been established as so.

### **Florida Extension**

Florida Extension was an integral part of DWH oil spill recovery efforts. As a member of the EOC, they worked to develop messages and to correct misinformation. In addition, they communicated with their publics regarding recent developments and information regarding recovery. They developed newsletters and held forums targeted to reach diverse audiences and provide information and answer questions.

Because of the broad spectrum of target publics of Florida Extension, they communicate with much of the general population. However, their work with other

community organizations appears to be through other partnerships (i.e. EOC). Given the benefits of collaboration suggested by other CROs during the DWH oil spill, it would be a recommendation for Florida Extension to develop a strategic collaboration and partnership plan with other community organizations. In addition to the benefit of additional resources, Florida Extension can serve as a resource for CROs to provide research-based solutions to problems that CROs (and the community) face. For instances, several of the CROs discussed difficulty in communicating with new and unique audiences. Florida Extension could assist in communication efforts with these groups as their reach is very broad within the community.

### **For-Profit Companies**

As previously mentioned, the role of CROs during a crisis is one as a service and information resource for communities. With this in mind, businesses should incorporate them into their crisis communication plans and establish a means in which to work with them during a crisis. As mentioned with CROs, establishing these partnerships and collaborations before a crisis, increases the chance for effective communication when a crisis happens. Therefore, companies should consider joining established networks, associations, task forces, and other areas where CROs are heavily involved. By establishing a relationship and partnership prior to a crisis, these CROs can assist the company in assisting key messages to stakeholders.

### **Technology & Social Media**

Results of this study indicated that the inability to control information was accelerated by social media. This finding supported Austin and Lareerier (2011) paper regarding the inability to monitor and control all the information out there regarding the DWH oil spill due the addition of new media and social media platforms. In addition,

CROs discussed, just as Austin and Lareerier (2011) did, that because of the sheer amount of information available on social and new media, it was impossible to correct all inaccurate information.

Social media will only continue to grow as a communication medium. Therefore, it is important to understand how to control the negative aspects (unable to control) of the social media, but it is also important for CROs to learn how to use social media effectively. Social media could ultimately serve as a powerful communication tool for organizations during a crisis. In developing crisis management plans, CROs should develop detailed and comprehensive social media plans that include how the medium will be used to effectively reach their target publics.

### **Science Communicators**

As with for-profit companies, science communicators should understand the role that CROs play in a community during a crisis. This is especially true during a crisis involving agriculture or natural resources (as with this case study). As identified earlier, CROs provide a service that fulfills a need within a community. Knowing this, communicators need to do their research before a crisis occurs. Communicators should become familiar with the CROs in their community and thoroughly understand their mission. Communicators should also consider developing a relationship with the CRO before a crisis occurs. Lastly, when developing a crisis communication plan, communicators should pre-empt the response that CRO organizations may have and be ready for a proactive or counter-active response.

In addition, communicators should also identify those CROs that would assist in getting their messages out to stakeholders during a crisis. CROs should become an

element of a crisis communication plan and strong consideration should be given to partnering with them prior to a crisis.

### **Contribution to Theory**

#### **CROs**

Each of the leaders within the CROs identified that they utilized at least one element of effective crisis and issues management. This indicated that they, as senior management, were involved and understood the importance of effective communication to their stakeholders. Although they did not specifically label it as public relations or crisis management, their tactics and goals were in line with several of the characteristics of excellent public relations functions identified in Excellence Theory.

#### **Crisis and Issues Management**

The identification of the uniqueness of the situation as a barrier to effective communication is in line with the first part of the SCCT theory. The situation was very influential in how CROs responded to the DWH oil spill. In addition, understanding the needs and current status of their communities also influenced CROs' communication responses.

Results from this study argue that to achieve effective crisis management, as indicated in Jaques (2007) model, the partnership and use of CROs as a resource is imperative. The work done by CROs to overcome communication barriers including collaboration, public relations, and issues and crisis management, ultimately led to effective communication during the DWH oil spill. Therefore, looking more closely at Jaques' (2007) model in relationship to the results of this study, results would suggest that the model be modified to include an addition in each quadrant where community

partnerships and collaboration is emphasized. Collaborative efforts could be used effectively at each level to achieve effective communication during a crisis.

Overall, the results of the study showed that effective crisis communication includes collaboration with CROs within impacted communities. Therefore, crisis management plans and models should incorporate that responsible party organizations develop partnerships and collaborations with CROs pre-crisis, during crisis, and crisis recovery. Doing so will increase the reach and effectiveness of messages during a crisis and also provide valued resources in order to better understand the impacted communities.

### **Collaboration**

The role of CROs in the DWH oil spill serves as evidence and support of Kapucu's (2006) work in studying collaboration theory in the event of disaster situations. However, this study expanded on Kapucu's work by focusing on barriers to communication efforts. More specifically, this study aimed to learn how these collaborations overcame communication barriers to ensure effective communication to their impacted communities. Results from this study support Kapucu's (2006) work and expands this theory to addressing how CROs overcame communication barriers through collaborating.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

#### **CROs**

Several of the CROs that participated in this study were umbrella organizations, which are defined as a collaboration of organizations that work together to improve lives of those within a community. As their definition suggests, these organizations collaborate and come together for the community, especially when the community is

struggling to recover from a crisis. Understanding how these organizations came together and how they work together, not only during a crisis would be beneficial in understanding CROs collaboration and partnerships.

Also, special attention needs to be played into the public relations efforts of CROs during a crisis situation. Because of limited resources, many CROs do not have designated public relations departments or practitioners. Therefore, CROs may not have the ability to develop a crisis communication plan or have a designated spokesperson. Yet, in the event of a crisis, as in this situation, they served in a public relations' role in order to reach out to the community. Based upon this information, it would be beneficial to continue research to further understand the Excellence Theory characteristics adopted by CROs in a crisis situation versus a non-crisis situation.

Additional research could also include studying CROs' definition of a crisis and an issue. It would be interesting to know if CROs defined these differently from for-profit companies and if they based their definition upon the impact it had on the community they serve. Understanding this would enable crisis and issues management plans to be tailored to CROs, if needed.

Lastly, when discussing man-made versus natural disasters, literature supports the statement that communities come together after a natural disaster, but less so after a man-made disaster. Results of this research show that although this was a man-made disaster, CROs came together to pull resources and assist with recovery efforts. Given this information, more research needs to be done on how CROs react to man-made disasters versus natural disasters. How do their efforts differ? Do they make efforts to bring community members together?

## **Crisis and Issues Management**

As indicated by Coombs (2006), there are several findings that need further research to determine their impact on developing crisis theory. To begin, this study simply scratched the surface of Waymer and Heath (2007) and Adkins (2012) recommendations to study crisis situations from beyond single managerial perspectives. Results from this study show that CROs practiced crisis management and issues management tactics. In fact, results showed that tactic used by the CROs resulted in effective communication. However, these organizations were not directly involved with the cause of the disaster. These organizations were simply reacting to the impact of this disaster on the communities they serve.

As the results of this research showed the crucial role played by CROs in providing effective communication during the DWH oil spill, future research should continue to explore the incorporation of CROs into management practices for crisis theory. More specifically, how do the organizations that caused a disaster (i.e. BP) work with these organizations? Do they work with these organizations? Did they work with these organizations prior to the disaster?

As previously indicated, CROs utilized tactics that in Jaques (2007) combined non-linear model. Several tactics from the model including training, simulations, issue and risk management, system activation/response, and post-crisis issue impacts were all utilized by CROs in response to DWH oil spill. These tactics were utilized to overcome communication barriers in order to effectively communicate with their publics during the DWH oil spill. In addition, the tactics were not used linearly, as suggested by the non-linearity of the model. Given that these tactics were utilized by CROs not directly impacted by the DWH oil spill to effectively communicate during a crisis, special

attention and future research should be considered on how aspects of Jaques (2007) model contribute overall to crisis theory. In addition, future research should focus on the application of Jaques (2007) model to organizations not directly impacted by a crisis.

Other areas of research should focus on the communities and the communication they received during a disaster. Understanding how stakeholders receive and perceive information from CROs would be an essential element in future research. Along the same lines, results from this research indicated that the public did not trust information from certain sources including government and the responsible party. Many also discussed that members of the community were coming to them for information or to verify information. Given this, conducting further research on trust and the perception of transparency of CROs during a crisis in comparison with other relevant parties in a disaster would be beneficial to further crisis management literature.

Another area of further research is to determine how the element of time impacted communication efforts of CROs during crisis situations. Although time was not an element that was studied in this particular case study, further research into how communication barriers changed over the course of a crisis would be effective in learning how to adequately prepare for a crisis situation. In addition, researching how CROs' communication efforts and messages changed over the course of the crisis in response to changing barriers would provide additional information on crisis management.

In addition to time, incorporating the element of location and how it impacted CROs' communication efforts would provide for further research. For instance, as the beaches on the entire Florida Panhandle did not have oil on their shores, it would be

interesting to learn how CROs' communication efforts between locations that had oil on the shore differed from a location that did not.

Lastly, understanding stakeholder perception of communication messages from a CRO during a crisis would provide crisis and issues management literature with a more overall picture of the role of CROs in crisis communication.

### **Collaboration**

As this study looked at collaborations during a crisis situation, research needs to focus on these collaborations outside of a crisis. More specifically, why do some collaborations work and some do not? What makes them originally come together? Also understanding the inner-relationships of these collaborative groups could perhaps provide insights into their effectiveness. In addition, learning stakeholder perception of collaborations would be instrumental in learning the effectiveness of collaborative communication efforts as well as program partnerships. Another important question is to learn if these collaborative organizations continue to work together after a crisis situation.

### **Florida Extension**

Given the role of Florida Extension in local communities and with various publics within the community, learning more about their collaborative efforts with CROs would be beneficial. Additional research into the relationships that CROs have with Florida Extension would provide further insight into the role Florida Extension plays within local communities. In addition, learning the perception of Florida Extension by CROs would assist Florida Extension with outreach assistance and messages. As the results of this study showed, collaborations and partnerships within a community increase effective

communication and hence, recovery efforts. Therefore, expanding CRO collaborations and partnership would enable Florida Extension to better serve and meet their mission.

### **Limitations of Research**

Several limitations were associated with this study. First, this study was done post-crisis. Therefore, this research was not looking specifically at previous communication efforts and partnerships that were developed prior to the DWH oil spill.

Secondly, utilizing a case study method includes several limitations. Fediuk, Coombs, and Botero (2012), Ahluwalia, Burnkrant, and Unnava (2000) and Coombs (2007) discuss that results from case study research cannot be generalizable to other crisis communication research of situations. They caution that case studies only provide “snapshots of time and how the organization responded to the situation at that time” (Fediuk et al., 2012, p. 636). In addition, they point out that often, case studies do not allow for the researcher to understand the impact of crisis communication messages on stakeholders. In this particular study, it would have been beneficial to learn from the community how the messages from the CROs met their needs and assisted with their understanding of the DWH oil spill.

### **Summary**

Results from this study showed that despite barriers, CROs utilized communication efforts rooted in collaboration, issues and crisis management, and public relations to effectively communicate with their audiences during the DWH oil spill. CROs developed and utilized crisis management tactics even though they were not at the center of the crisis. Their efforts were taken to assist their communities with the recovery process following the DWH oil spill. Steps taken by CROs to provide this crucial communication to their stakeholders provide insight into the valuable role that

CROs play in communicating with target publics during crisis situations. Continuing to study the role that CROs play in crisis situations and in communicating with stakeholders could extend crisis theories to provide researchers with a comprehensive look at crisis situations, and more specifically crisis communication.

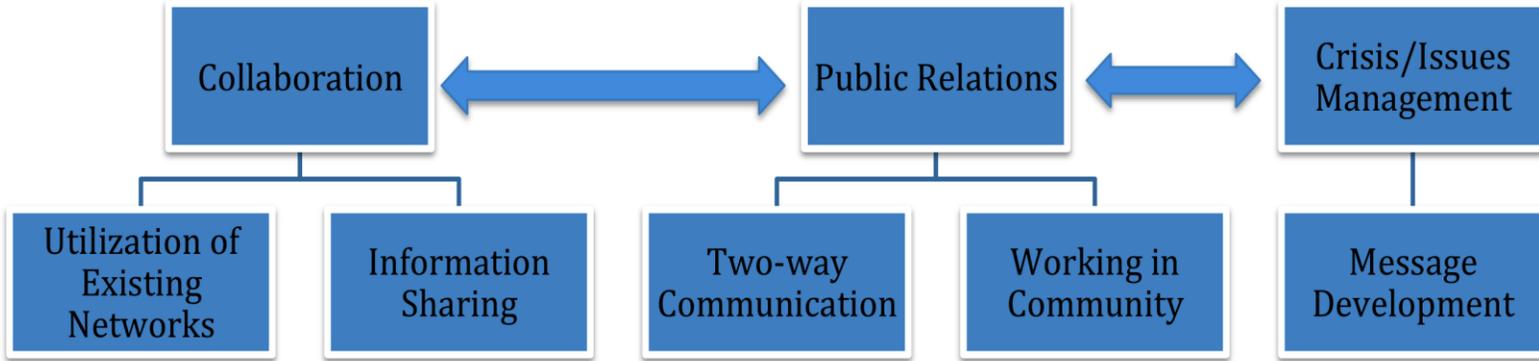


Figure 5-1. CROs Issue and Crisis Management Model for Effective Communication, Lindsey (2012)

APPENDIX A  
INVITATION FLYER

## **Assessing Community Resource Organizations Barriers to Communication during an Environmental Crisis**

Angie B. Lindsey is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Florida who is interested in learning how community resource organizations and NGOs have managed the on-going issues surrounding the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. She is particularly interested in the barriers to communication encountered by these organizations when attempting to communicate with key publics during and after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Angie currently serves as the coordinator for the Community Outreach and Dissemination Core of the NIEHS Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities Grant.

As part of her study, she is asking for interviews with leaders and key staff within community organizations and NGOs.

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of the study is to learn how community resource organizations and NGOs communicated with their key publics during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. More specifically, the study will uncover barriers to communication that were encountered by Gulf Coast community resource organizations.

**What will be asked:** The interview will consist of questions regarding planning and implementing proactive and reactive communication strategies related to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. In addition, participants will be asked about their frustrations and their barriers to communicating effectively with their publics.

**Time requirement:** approximately one hour

**Logistics:** Interviews will take place over the phone, Skype or personal August 13<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup>. Researcher is flexible with times and can work around interviewees schedule. The researcher would prefer to meet personally, and can come and meet with interviewees at their convenience during that week. If that week does not work, we can arrange a phone or Skype interview.

Your participation in this research project is completely voluntary. Your identity will be confidential. There will be no compensation for your participation in this study and there are no anticipated risks or benefits.

*For more information regarding the study, or to volunteer, please contact Angie Lindsey at [ablindsey@ufl.edu](mailto:ablindsey@ufl.edu) or 904-509-3518. Your consideration is greatly appreciated!*

APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Participant Informed Consent**

*Identifying Community Resource Organizations' Barriers to Communication during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill*

The Healthy Gulf, Healthy Communities NIEH Grant is engaged in research to determine the barriers to communication encountered by Community Resource Organizations during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

As part of the project, we would like to ask Florida Gulf Coast Community Resource Organizations about their perceptions, thoughts, and insights with respect to communicating with their key publics during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. With your permission, we would like to ask you to participate in this study by sharing your opinions, actions and perceptions in a one-on-one in-depth interview. In-depth interviews are constructed for the purpose of adding to the body of knowledge regarding a particular topic (Wengraff, 2006). These types of interviews are very conversational between the researcher and the interviewee. Although the questions are planned before, the researcher often has to improvise in order to go more in-depth. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. Your responses will be confidential as no names or organizations will be linked to responses.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw consent of your participation at any time without consequence or penalty. There are no risks or immediate benefits to participants; you will receive no compensation for participating. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Group results of the study are expected to be available November 2012 upon request. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact us at 352-392-0502. Questions about your rights as a research participant may be directed to the UF Institutional Review Board office, University of Florida, PO Bo 112250, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250 (352-392-0433).

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I have read the procedure described above.

I \_\_\_\_\_, voluntarily give my consent to participate in Angie B. Lindsey's study designed to obtain perceptions, opinions and actions regarding community resource organizations' communication efforts during and after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spil. Participation is expected to take about one hour in a single setting. I have received a copy of this description and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

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Name

Date

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Principal Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX C INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Before we begin, can you tell me a little about yourself and your organization?*

- A few questions about your organization
  - What is your mission?
  - What is your role within the organization?
  - How would you describe your organization's role within the community?
  - Discuss other roles you may serve within the community

*Let's begin with discussing the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in relation to your organization*

- How prepared do you believe your organization was for the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?
  - How would you describe the effectiveness of your preparations?
  - Looking back, how would you have prepared differently?
- Describe the role of your organization during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?
  - How did that role differ after the oil spill?
  - How has it continued to change in response to oil disaster?
- In reacting to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, talk to me about your organization's number one priority?
  - How did you ensure that this was done?
  - Were you able to meet that priority? How?
- How did you utilize existing disaster management plans in response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill?
  - Is your plan geared more for natural disasters?
    - For environmental disasters?
    - For weather disasters?
  - Describe how changes to the plan are made?
    - Will your plan change based upon the events and the response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?
  - How do you communicate in times of disaster?
    - Internal communication plans
    - External communication plans
    - How did you utilize your communication plan in response to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?

*For the next few questions, I want to discuss your stakeholders. For the purpose of our conversation, let's define stakeholders as people that you want to engage in the communication process.*

- Could you describe your stakeholders for me?

- Internal stakeholders
- External stakeholders
- Briefly describe their demographics
- How do they communicate?
- What are their values?
- What were their needs during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?
- Prior to the Deepwater Horizon Spill, how would you describe your communication efforts with your stakeholders?
  - How did this communication change during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill?
  - How do you communicate with them now?
  - Is this different from a year ago, 6-months ago, etc.
- How would you rate the effectiveness of the communication with your stakeholders?
  - Prior to the Oil Spill?
  - During the Oil Spill?
  - Now?
  - How would you change these efforts if all resources were available?
- In communicating with your stakeholders during the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill describe tactics and methods that you utilized?
  - Partner with other organizations?
  - Used communication channels through a larger agency?
  - Utilized media partnerships?
  - Paid advertising?
  - Grassroots efforts?
  - Relied on media coverage?

*For the last set of questions, let's discuss media coverage of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill in relation to your organization*

- Please describe the local media coverage of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.
  - How did your organization work with the local media?
    - Were your key messages relayed by the media?
  - Were they effective in reaching your stakeholders?
- How did the local coverage differ from the national coverage?
  - How did your organization work the national media?
  - Explain which do you think was more influential and why?
- In thinking about media coverage (both national and local) of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, describe the impact media coverage had for community resource organizations such as yours?

- Along the same lines, describe how you think the media coverage impacted your community as a whole?
- In thinking back, how would you work differently?
- How did your communication efforts surrounding the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill differ from efforts after natural disasters and other crisis situations?
  - How did you have to change your plans to better meet the needs of your key publics?
- In thinking back to the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, discuss the communication tactics that your organization did that you consider effective
  - Why were they effective?
  - Will you incorporate these tactics in a disaster management plan?
  - What tactics do you think were ineffective? Why were they ineffective?
- Looking to the future, discuss tactics that you plan to add to a communication plan
  - Grassroots efforts
  - Media relations
  - Advertising
  - E-newsletters
  - E-mail
  - Public meetings/gatherings
- Do you have documents that you would be willing to share with me that provide examples of communication efforts practiced by your organization?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add regarding communicating with your stakeholders before, during and after the Deepwater Horizon Oil spill?

*For my last set of questions, I would like to ask you a few questions regarding the Regional Forum you attended back in April.*

- What were your expectations for attending the Regional Forum?
- Did the forum meet your expectations? Please explain
- What was the most valuable experience you had during this forum?
- What was the least beneficial thing about this forum?
- Do you have any additional comments on the forum?

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